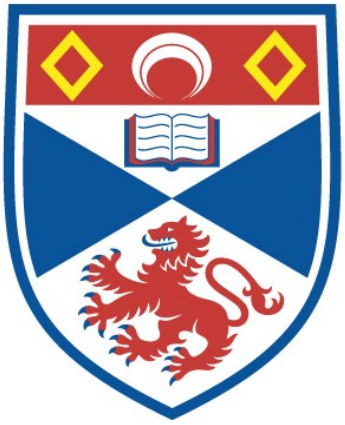
PATRISTIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS POWER AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN LATER ANTIQUITY

Gillian Cloke

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St Andrews



1990

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Gillian Cloke

Submitted for the degree of M. Phil. (Mode A), 31st March 1990

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Abstract

The role of women in the early Church has been the subject of a great deal of interest in recent times, with both feminists and those representing a more traditional outlook claiming substantiation for theories on the one hand of the alienation and 'de-naturizing' of women of conspicuous piety, on the other of their useful assimilation within a caring patristic outlook. This thesis will take an overview of women from various ranks of society pursuing different routes to accredited 'saintliness' and assess the relevance of some of these views.

Holy women are known to us mainly through the voices of the Church Fathers; before observing later revisionist rhetoric, a survey of that pertaining at the time is a primary need. The eschatological mentality of the early Church coupled with a need for a post-Constantinian equivalent of martyrdom as the expression of ultimate commitment to Church over State to produce teaching on the necessity of a retreat from the physical and sexual aspects of life. I shall contend that this preaching was seen as of special application to women, by the perceived link between femaleness and physicality, and because of the Church's tradition of drawing women into commitments of anti-social implications.

I shall consider how patristic teaching directed women to a heightened awareness of their sexual status, and that some sought to redress this by abstinence (especially vowed virginity and widowhood) while others sought to express their pious aspirations while accepting family life and burdens. I shall examine how consistent was the advice of patristic authors, both internally and with each other; and whether the consequences of their preaching led them into difficulties with their congregations. Further, how enthusiastically women took to this preaching; the problems they had with it; and the problems their men had with those women influenced by it.

Contents

Preface

In apology for occasional translational inconsistencies in the presentation of this work, I can only say that I have found it to be common to this area of work. I have, broadly, translated titles: the exceptions being those, such as Clement of Alexandria's Paedagogus and Stromata, where the original title is more instantly recogniseable and thus affords less confusion (in these cases than The Instructor and Miscellanies); and those such as some of John Chrysostom's tracts whose titles are equally unwieldy in both languages and easier to abbreviate in the original. Periodical titles are abbreviated following the conventions of l'Année Philologique.

It is a great pleasure to me to be able to set down in print the debts of gratitude I owe, to colleagues, friends and family. From my former studies, which led me to this point, my deepest respect and affection are offered to Miriam Griffin and John Matthews, both of whom have inspired so many besides myself with a desire to 'do something more' in this field. Here in St. Andrew's, my Department has never failed to provide support, humour, sympathy, gossip, and a boot from behind, where needed. My gratitude to Geoffrey, Michel and Michael, also to John, for making me feel thoroughly welcome and even useful in Swallowgait; and to Tig, Jennifer and Lynn, without whose hard work and humour under fire there would almost be no Swallowgait. The greatest debt of gratitude, however, goes to my supervisor. Jill Harries' meticulous scholarship lifted my aspirations; her unstinted assistance lifted my spirit at times of crisis and uncertainty. Without her unremitting care I could not have finished my research: I consider myself fortunate beyond words to have been supervised by her.

For personal support, there is not space to mention everyone: but deep thanks must go to some in particular. To Katie and Angela for affectionate forbearance with my woes when they had so many of their own; to David and Christine for their particular brand of intelligent sympathy (with especial gratitude to the proof-reading half of that remarkable partnership); to Marie-Louise and John for warm nurturance during the final stages; to Andrew, Mike, John, Julian and particularly Sharon, because everybody needs good Neighbours; to Sophie and Julia, for inspiration, and for being there when needed. Above all to my colleague, Scottie, who kept me sane and instilled in me a little of each of his humanity, his sense of proportion, and his Gaelic.

My family have borne patiently with me during what must have seemed an interminable time. Thanks go to my adored Big Brothers, Jon and Geoff, who have been inspired to emulation of such an obviously enviable existence. 'The eldest have borne most': this work owes its existence to the faith and support of my father and step-mother, Malcolm and Roz. It owes its inspiration to three warmly indomitable sisters: Lindy; Jackie; and, above all, Daphne, for me the very first 'strong woman of the Church'; to whose memory it is lovingly dedicated.

Abbreviations

AJAH	American Journal of Ancient History
CPh	Classical Philology
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
EH	Various authors, Ecclesiastical History
ESAR	An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome, ed. Tenney Frank &c.
HM	Historia Monachorum in Aegypto.
JAAR	Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
LH	Palladius, Lausiac History
PBSR	Proceedings of the British Academy
PG	Patrologia Graeca, ed. Migne
PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. Migne
SPCK	Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge
SC	Sources Chrétiennes

Patristic perceptiveness: the sources and the problem

This thesis will assess the work, influence and importance of the women of the 4th - 5th centuries who were inspired by the pietistic tendencies of their age. We will be observing them specifically from the viewpoint of the patristic authors: noting from these the kind of rhetoric addressed to women's condition, models posited for imitation, exempla from personal experience and assessments of whether and how women lived up to the projected ideals. That this will be considered through the medium of the Church Fathers is something of a necessity: what these women wrote of themselves has not survived, though some of the writers purport to be using their words. The only sources undisputably by women from this period are fairly peripheral in their usefulness to this topic: The Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba, a devotional poem of mainly literary interest, the Pilgrimage of Egeria, which provides a helpful portrait of the aristocratic devotee in action at an isolated point in her life [1], and the Martyrdom of St. Cyprian by Eudocia, notionally at least of historical/hagiographical intent, but about as reliable for the purposes of today's historian as the Historia Augusta. This being so, one has mainly the copious but tendentious writings of the male authors in order to try and gain an understanding of the lot of women, the limitations of which are self-evident. Thus, while an attempt will be made to discern the real as opposed to the attributed motives of the women concerned and while we will examine their practical applications of their vocations, set them in the context of their social milieu and consider the various pressures on them from church and social background, nevertheless fundamentally, all of what we can deduce is filtered through the outlook of the male writers and what they wish to stress or fail to tell us. Any direct question of what women really thought of what they did is self-frustrating: even when considering what can be learned inadvertently, from the ways in which

they succeeded that surprised the patristic writers, or how they failed, one is still battling a mass of patristic presuppositions that tend to render any sense of objectivity largely spurious. The best effects can be achieved by juxtaposing with the clerical rhetoric social evidence, attested in legal documentation and epigraphic material, to come up with a more overall picture. The legal sources, though equally all by men, are more representative of the overall social picture and more adequately convey factors such as the pressure on the more active and outspoken of these women; but for the actual detail of the lives of pious women of these centuries we should remember at all times that we are interpreting what the Fathers reported women as doing in response to what the Fathers advised them to do.

The only outstanding exception to this generality is in the Apophtegmata Patrum, the anonymously written collections of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, which, amongst the collected wisdom of a myriad, frequently anonymous, coenobites and eremites, include what purport to be the teachings of three women, in their own reported speech. While making it clear at least that there were women in the desert, with sayings attributed to them which were thought worthy of inclusion in the collections, this evidence needs its own caveat: as oral traditions transmitted to written memorials of Coptic, Syriac, Aramaic, Greek and (later) Latin origins by copyists who 'did not regard themselves as bound to transfer any written material that they had without change', with a premium placed on spiritual edification over historical authenticity - 'written to answer the question in the mind of the reader, "Why am I told this?" not the question "How did this come about?"' [2], the Sayings of the Fathers are frustrating as often as they are illuminating and to be used with care. The voices of the women reported by them are sufficiently different and have enough incidental personal detail to seem to be reasonably representative; but

'authenticity' is a will-o'-the-wisp quality when applied to writings emanating from the desert.

Holy women were a frequent source of inspiration to Christian writers of the 4th and 5th centuries and were well observed, from the centrally influential ascetics of Rome in their Aventine eyries to the extreme eremitic tendencies of the desert mothers. Individually eminent women attracted even wider documentation. When Olympias turns her back on secular glory and combats the establishment on behalf of Chrysostom, we hear of it from two Ecclesiastical historians as well as from her anonymous hagiographer, Palladius, and Chrysostom's own letters. [3] When Melania the Elder leaves family, friends, and the centre of the civilised world in favour of self-immolation in Palestine, we have the voices of Palladius, Jerome and Paulinus of Nola as witness [4]; on Proba, Anicia Juliana and Demetrias we have Jerome, Augustine and Pelagius. The presence of these women generated sermons and homilies, on them and to them, inspirational works, commentaries and exegesis, histories, Vitae, and, often most revealing, letters.

The first obvious categorization we can make of writers about women is that of the many who can offer the observations of close personal relations with females of conspicuous piety; many of the eminent writers and male saints of the period seem to have their piety inspired, reflected, or indeed directed by a sister, a mother, an aunt of similarly devotional disposition. Piety seems to beget piety in certain families in our field of survey; the writers so studied all too frequently acknowledge the benign influence of a devout female relative.

Augustine, one of the most prolific and influential writers of the fourth century, had his pursuit of personal piety dogged by feminine influence. His treatment of his mother's life in his Confessions, and his further references to her influence in more general works of

theology such as De Beata Vita and De Ordine are unique for the clear light in which they show his piety as relative to hers and her influence as the deciding factor in his capitulating to his vocation. Gregory of Nazianzus was another cleric created by the ambition of a formidable mother: in all his writings on the personal, Nonna has a prominant place, deciding the ordination of his father and himself and the main influence in his account of his sister's superior piety also. In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, the sister was the strong influence, on the mother along with the rest of the family: he related of her in his Life of Macrina how she bore the responsibility for his clericalization and that of his brothers, Basil of Caesarea and Peter, besides training her mother in the religious life, finally instituting a convent along with herself. His manner in the Life when treating of her intellectual and spiritual apparatus verges on the awe-struck; and in her counselling to his vocation are telling echoes of the 'big sister' whom he still seems to consider very much his intellectual superior.

Other sources with female relatives eminently suitable for similar eulogization are less helpful. John Chrysostom, possessed of a mother with a talent for drawing encomiums on the superior quality of Christian motherhood out of even notably misogynistic pagans [5] writes only incidentally and improvingly of Anthusa and emphasizes how in certain respects her concern for him overcame her piety: she tried to prevent him becoming a priest. Ambrose's few extant letters to his sister Marcellina tell us almost nothing about her, serving only to enlighten us as to Ambrose's situation; though in this connection it is worth observing that the otherwise more helpful Augustine has a similarly unregarded and barely attested sister (and according to some traditions, two); we know that he constructed a rule for a convent run by her but we do not even know her name. Paulinus of Nola is very nearly as frustrating: usefully related as he was to Melania the Elder and with a

wife, Therasia, noted for her devotion, he was nonetheless a writer more concerned with literary style, theological niceties and his patron saint than with preserving a factual account of his life and times, and his usefulness as a historical witness is limited. Yet in letters to Sulpicius Severus, for instance, he gives us a helpful account of Melania's visit to him, subject to the limitations of his treating of the occasion in a traditional manner calculated to do justice to the dignitas shown to his family by this old-style visitation. On the pious women more intimately connected with him, he is, unfortunately even more reticent; denying us, for instance, the opportunity of an in-depth study of his continent marriage with 'the Tanaquil of our times', Therasia. However he drops enough small items into certain of his letters and his poems to make them useful.

Others wrote from the position of being an admirer or follower of a notable holy woman. Some wrote from the position of advisor to devout female satellites, to counsel, admonish and praise them, to their further renown. Augustine courted notable Christian women such as Proba, her daughter Anicia Juliana and grand-daughter Demetrias and used them as sounding-boards for various of his improving addresses. He attempted to do the same thing with Melania Junior and her mother Albina, and his failure so to do provoked some of the more interesting and revealing letters about his relations with his congregation as well as with the aristocracy. John Chrysostom is as full of unfulfilled promise in this respect as in the sphere of familial information. We do not have from him any account of his relations with the numbers of ladies eminent in birth and spirituality who surrounded him in Constantinople. The partial exception this was Olympias, his friend, provider and disciple, who was so influential and instrumental to him and many other bishops of the Eastern church. That she was important to him we may deduce from the witness of other writers who testify to his

spiritual and material dependence on her, but his letters to her, though indubitably indicative of a high and even emotional regard are not a reasoned account of their relationship, such as we gain from other writers in close proximity to outstanding women.

One of the most helpful and informative of the Fathers with regard to names, narrative details and statuses of pious women of his day was, ironically enough, one who most often and stridently doubted their capacity for spirituality (despite being surrounded by some of the most ferociously ascetic females of the age): the problematic Jerome. Around Jerome we find a large circle of women to whom he writes and makes reference and his relationships with whom he is forced to defend against the scandalous tongues of Roman society gossip-lovers. The majority of information about these comes from Jerome's extensive and vividly informative letters; both from the more workaday letters of which Marcella received so many, and those of a more rhetorical nature, of exhortation or consolation or admonition. Letter 22 to Eustochium on the Virgin's profession, and Letter 54 to Furia on the duty of remaining a widow, are each more a broadsheet advertising his stance on virginity and widowhood; Letter 77, to Oceanus about the death of Fabiola, a kind of text exercise in consolation in Christian imitation of the stoic Roman set pieces in such an eventuality. In his letters, more illuminating in their passionate rhetoric of vituperation and self-justification than those of any of the other Fathers, we have Jerome's account of Paula's severance with her family and her commencement of a life of asceticism alongside him: a contemporary eye-witness (albeit with an axe to grind) to a noblewoman's experience of the road to ascesis through adverse peer and family pressure and through personal tragedies such as the loss of her eldest daughter Blesilla, arguably a victim of her own ascetic fervour. Jerome is simply interested in women, possibly in response to their interest in

him; the number of female admirers and followers attested is not coincidental. It is difficult to find parallels in other writers with such items as his long and detailed letter to Laeta about the proper Christian upbringing for her small daughter (who eventually ended up at Bethlehem as Eustochium's successor as the head of the women's convent Paula and Jerome had instituted) or his letter to Pacatula on feminine training for her small child, or his whimsically graceful note of thanks to the youthful Eustochium for a gift of bracelets, doves and cherries. Nor is Jerome alone in using his letters as merely the excuse for a general airing of dogma; the letters of these great men received often as widespread an airing as their theological treatises. They were part of the Christian expression of the ratio bene vivendi, the Roman preoccupation with the good life translated into terms of Christian duty; the letters are intensely conscious of obligation and of literary merit: witness Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Paulinus of Nola, Basil of Caesarea, following Symmachus, Praetextatus, Macrobius and Libanius in writing to their large circle of acquaintance who eagerly copy the letters and pass them on.

Besides great men writing to satellite holy women, we have the witnesses of more humble men who were themselves the satellites of female luminaries, writing of their close acquaintance with these saintly ladies. Such a one wrote the anonymous Life of Olympias, Deaconess; in similar case was Gerontius, the successor of Melania the Younger as head of her community, who wrote her Life. These have the disadvantages of being written more in arrears and at a greater distance than, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina or Gregory Nazianzus' biographical works on his family, in addition to which, as hagiography rather than biography, they are subject to a certain amount of historical revisionism. Nonetheless, leaving on one side the increasingly formulaic attitudes depicted for their subjects, their

background is helpful. Other writers were camp-followers of a more general application, collecting scrap-books of sanctity which include useful information on workaday female piety along with occasionally telling cameos of some of the celebrities. The Apophthtegmata Patrum noted above comes in this category; Palladius is another prime example. While knowing personally many of the most eminent holy men and women around during his sojourn in the Desert he is content to give a spectator's account rather than entering the dogmatic lists. His accounts of eminent holy women such as Melania the Elder (with whom he travelled) and Olympias in his Lausiac History and Dialogues are invaluable for being less closely involved than some of our witnesses; and is equally useful in his little vignettes of some of the more obscurely devout desert women who practised extreme forms of self-denial in isolation.

All the above and many others besides contributed to the great body of exhortatory literature which provides us with yet more material for consideration. Virtually every Christian thinker of any note felt constrained to add his voice in the debate over continence. Most galloped into prose over virginity: Following Tertullian's strident lead, Ambrose, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregories of Nyssa and Nazianzus, Basils of Caesarea and Ancyra, Clement of Alexandria, Methodius are just the most notable. But enough treatises exist in different voices on widowhood and marriage to make a viable synthesis of their common points. Some were particularly alert to the problems: besides his personal witness, Augustine's predisposition towards a positive assessment of the value of female piety makes him a valuable contributor of more indirect textual material on the assessment of women's contribution to ascetic spirituality at the time. His exhortations to women's lot are, as noted above not empty homilies imparted to the intellectual air, but directives written to real women

of his acquaintance seeking help in these regions of theological dispute. In the case of De Bono Viduitatis and De Virginitate the women concerned are a mother and daughter we hear of similarly indirectly from other church fathers: Anicia Juliana and her daughter Demetrias, from the very topmost rank of Roman society but showing the familial tendency towards asceticism that is a feature of the age. Gregory of Nyssa similarly shows himself in possession of an understanding of women's issues gained from a closer perspective, in his On Virginity: a gentler work than many on this topic. In exhortatory areas John Chrysostom is perhaps unexpectedly helpful: in On not Marrying Again, On the Kind of Women who ought to be taken as Wives, On Virginity, On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity, he takes a sometimes unexpectedly perceptive line on the difficulties encountered by his female adherents, as he considers the issues of the debate over the powers of women within the church and their troubles over celibacy. Incidentally this tendency also crops up in others of his works not addressed to the generality of women: in his more personal Letter to a Young Widow and in portions of On the Priesthood and various of his homilies. Ambrose is another who is more helpful in theoretical matters than personal, contributing homilies on virginity and widowhood.

In addition to the highly personalized contributions of these men, we have more anonymous and generic evidence about the issues raised by female devotions in the variety of teaching documents abounding from this period: the Teaching of the Apostles, Church Order, the Apostolic Constitutions and Canons, to say nothing of the canons of the various church councils. As with the law of the land, these are eloquent about what the recipients were doing amiss, particularly where there is reinforcement and repetition: and are sometimes a useful index to cases of the Fathers being over-enthusiastic about the capacity of their proteges for ministry.

The treatment of women's concerns by men could be done with great sympathy and discretion, depending on the author. Augustine's predispositions, while tending to make him take a slightly hectoring tone in the discourses on abstract subjects, marriage, widowhood and so on, mean that in the particular he is more pliable and warm with his female subjects. Monica, painted in lively colours wherever she appears, is made to express surprise in de Ordine that a woman's words should be recorded in such a discourse; but in the Socratic atmosphere of de Beata Vita she serves as a useful foil for Augustine when, with characteristic bluntness and determination, she compels him to explain fully anything she (and by implication the untrained mind in the audience) does not understand. [6] It is illuminating to contrast Gregory of Nyssa humbly according Macrina the central, philsopher's role in their Socratic dialogue on the origin and final home of the soul at her deathbed. Endowed with a great capacity for hero-worship of his formidable family, Gregory's treatment of them is also informative in its differences: 'Macrina is brought near by a biography, Basil is made distant by a panegyric.' [7] The difference may reflect family dynamics; it is more likely to represent the difference between what was proper in the treatment to a pious male, who represented the priesthood, and a pious female, however devout and dominant a sister.

The absence of written evidence by women is not to say that they did not contribute to the intellectual life of the period; the foremost Christian women of the day indicated an advanced level of awareness of the importance of scholastic and literary skills in disseminating Christianity. Literarily admired women studied and argued on theology and biblical commentaries and studies, or assisted established male authorities, as did the Melanias, Marcella, Paula, Eustochium and Olympias. Their scholarly capacities seem frequently so prodigious as to astound the men who wrote of them; Melania the Elder according to

> being very industrious and loving literature, turned night into day, perusing every writing of the ancient commentators including 3,000,000 lines of Origen and 250,000 of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil and other standard writers. Nor did she read them through only once and casually, but laboriously went through each book seven or eight times. [8]

Marcella, Jerome says, asked questions he found hard to answer and corrected priests, giving her pronouncements as Jerome's so as not to offend, and worked with him against Origenism, writing a succession of letters challenging the heretics and helping to get them condemned. Jerome himself complains of her exactions and demands on his own activities due to her never-satisfied intellectual curiosity. Paula and Eustochium learned Greek and Hebrew to assist Jerome in his studies; indeed he recommends to Laeta that her small daughter be educated in Greek, just as were boys, with small bribes to expedite her learning. [9] This kind of learning was, it seems, what devout women were understood to excel in: the literacy which might be of use in support of men, translating, copying, disseminating what they themselves might not write. Melania the Younger was similarly famed for her community's industrious copying and dissemination of texts known for their elegance and correctness. [10] There were attempts at other genres by women. Proba's Cento, on the other level, argues a massive knowledge of Virgil as well as of theology, and the work, despite Jerome's harsh comments [11] achieved a certain success as a popular school text into the middle ages (and that despite Gelasius' decree of 496 relegating it to be included in the 'apocalyptic' writings, to be used only for private reading). Eudocia's Life of St. Cyprian was the only one to survive of a reputed 6 works by her, including poetic paraphrases of the Octateuch and of the prophets Daniel and Zacharias, a paean to her husband's victory over the Persians in 422 and a Homeric cento on the life of Christ.

But women of this period, however literate and literary, did not, it seems, comment on what they found around them, and did not write history. Nor do their undoubted contributions to the epistolary rounds survive. Jerome, Augustine and Chrystostom preserved copies of their outgoing letters to these women, but none of the letters that provoked their replies. [12] The judgements on the times and the participants were made by the Fathers; trained rhetors, lawyers, philosophers turned Christian theorists, or sometimes sincere undistinguished men justified by inspiration.

However fierce the degree with which views on women, often derived from the Apostle (v. Chapter 2) were held, a great and constant double-think is in evidence in our sources which needs to be borne in mind. All, including the sternest of the fathers, while accepting apostolic teaching on women as sinful in nature so subject in worship, nonetheless reserve the right to approve of certain female exemplars to their sex; each knows of some paragon or paragons, unique in virtue, astonishing in devotion, examples even to their male colleagues. Even Jerome, the hard-liner, while believing that 'women are burdened by sins, carried about by every wind of doctrine, always learning and never reaching knowledge of the truth' yet found so many female paragons to admire and counsel that his name became a byword amongst the scandal-seekers in Rome, as he bitterly complained: the monk who was so tormented by she-demons seems to have been equally beset by she-saints. [13]

1. Though demonstrably the most useful 'female' source, Egeria's pilgrimage has received extensive treatment elsewhere; so that I felt, perhaps arbitrarily, that there was not room in this study for another detailed consideration of her and her genre.
2. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers; the Alphabetical Collection, transl. Benedicta Ward, translator's preface, p. xiii; Harlots of the Desert, Benedicta Ward, p. 91
3. Palladius, HL 56 ff.; Dial 35 & 55; Sozomen EH 8.9; 8.24
4. HL 46 f.; Jer. Let. 39.5; Chronici Canones 329; Paulinus Let. 29
5. Letter to a Young Widow 2; On the Priesthood I.5
6. de Ordine 1.10.31; de Beata Vita 3.19
7. Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The Life of St. Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa' in The Craft of the Ancient Historian, ed. Eadie & Ober, p. 449.
8. LH 38 & 46
9. Jer. Let. 127.7 9 ff.; 107.9
10. Gorce, n. 3 on sec. 23 & n. 1 on sec. 26, Vie de Ste Mélanie
11. Let. 130
12. Though a collection of letters including some purporting to be from Macrina was known to a 14th century scribe, who from them judged Macrina a theosophos - and elected not to copy them. MS Vaticanus Graecus 578.11 (f. 189), cited in Momigliano, art. cit. p. 456.
13. Let. 133.4; Let. 77

Womanhood and the Fathers: The Imago Dei Controversy

'He for God only, she for God in him.' (Milton, Paradise Lost 4.299)

Given that our main sources for this period are the patristic authors, the first aspect that needs to be examined is how far there was a coherent theological line advocated for pious women as their route to salvation; what were the criteria for accredited virtue in women, the methods of its expression, disqualifications, ramifications and grounds for dispute. This involves assessing the varying importance of the different levels of thought regarding the ideal for piety inasfar as it weighed against what might be practicably expected from their situations; and how far all of this advice is informed by each writer's personal prejudice.

Their attitudes take their root, filtered through varying degrees, in, for them the first and greatest Christian writer, the Apostle Paul. The ambiguities in Paul, however, we will show complicated further innate divisions in patristic attitudes. In the centuries immediately following the legitimization of the church, the church authorities were seeking more to define and to quantify, hence the importance of the distinctions in Paul between what was and what was not a commandment; and women in the church in particular were subject to a great lack of definition with regard to what positions, if any, they could occupy, and as to accepted modes of expression of their piety. Thus, if in the sub-apostolic period the tendency was for the effects of Christian teaching to seem to make women less heedful of the restrictions of familias, upbringing and state in the 4th and 5th centuries we see the same authorities used as part of an attempt to "place" women within the established environs of the

Church. It was in any case a period of reinforcement and settlement of embryonic existing organizations, of Church Councils and Canons and the troubled attempts to establish a dominant and accepted orthodoxy in the aftermath of divisive persecution, which left wayward strands such as the Montanists, the Arians and the Donatists unaccounted for.

In this process, the dicta of Paul on such irregular situations as women ministering for the Church were somewhat less than clear: 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man' sounds fairly final; if it were not for the way that he also accords Phoebe the appellation 'diakonos' (unclear in application in his time, but full of resonance in the period under consideration), commends Tryphaena and Tryphosa as 'fellow-workers' and accords Priscilla precedence over Aquilla as leaders of a house-church [1]. Nonetheless, after Paul's time, the tendency was to use appeals to scripture in efforts to define women towards their greater restriction in the process of stratification. This is due to nothing so simple as "misogyny", mistrust of women, or a desire to restrict their activities on grounds of prejudice. The process is much more complex and subject to many levels of thought about women; it was influenced by what scriptures say of women's subjection by original sin, matched, contradicted or confirmed by clerical experience of woman as the temptation, the problem or the example. Through this the church writers have to tread a path to sort and set in context the ways in which the kinds of female status and ideas regarding them have developed independently. A large part of this study, then, is to look at the interaction between the theoretical views the Fathers postulate and modify, and the practicalities of the situation.

The starting position we should consider from patristic application of the scriptures, is the theory of the naturally abject condition of women, advanced to back up exhortations to women of being appropriately silent and submissive in their behaviour. Much of the Fathers' consciousness of women as inferior members of the Church centres around the notion of the imperfect participation of women in the imago dei, as expounded by Paul in I Corinthians 11; texts such as 'the head of every man is Christ, and the head of every woman is man' [2] were taken to indicate that women lacked some essential quality that men shared with the Godhead.

We learn much about the theological position of the women of the fourth century in the patristic authors, from their notions of what was wrong with women, and what was right with them, and hence their advice to their vocations. The ideal properties of women were seen in modesty, silence, faithfulness and purity; but to judge from the constant reiteration of these as goals and as necessities, this was often perceived as not being the case. For the Fathers also saw womankind as being essentially sinful; vain, inconstant, deceitful, more subject to temptation. An integral scriptural authority backing up this stance was Paul's alleged first letter to Timothy. This has some of the most unequivocal sections in the New Testament: such as the often-quoted 'I do not allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man: she must be silent' and 'Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.' [3] Modern biblical scholars are now inclined to reject the authorship of I Timothy as being attributable to Paul; [4] but to the early church authors it seemed indisputable evidence from one of the most incontrovertible sources available to them of the position of women with regard to the church. John Chrysostom's commentary on this letter (with which he seems to have been naturally in sympathy) is a

case in point; he finds nothing to balk at in the severity of the supposed pronouncements of the apostle in this case. Women should be silent, the apostle rightly says, for 'the sex is in a certain way loquacious' and 'the mind of woman is somewhat infantile'. Because she was deceived, 'the woman taught once and for all and upset everything...for the female sex is weak and vain, and here this is said of the whole sex'. Paulinus of Nola explains the prohibition in terms of woman's innate pride and weakness: 'Women are forbidden to teach in church, so that their spirits may not be puffed up and so that they may not dare to gaze on the decrees of wisdom and then secede through becoming haughty with pride.' The exemplary woman should 'prefer fear to depth of knowledge'. For Ambrose, simply: 'By a woman, care entered the world' though conceding 'by a virgin, salvation'. [5] Others of the fathers, such as Augustine, differentiate between the woman and the lifestyle, and notably the sexual attitude; but for most, following Paul, women represented the downfall of rationality through sexuality and were seen as being so tied to their sexual nature that to renounce it was to become tantamount to a third sex. Choosing celibacy broke the bond of their subjection to original sin; but those not able to encompass this, or those attempting it and failing were held as representing an actual danger to the Christian life; therefore any woman was inherently dangerous, following Tertullian: 'you have been made the sword that destroys' who 'although you are free from the actual crime, you are not free from the odium attaching to it'; for 'that other, as soon as he has felt desire for your beauty and has mentally already committed the deed to which his desire pointed, perishes'. [6]

On women, then, is particularly laid the burden of avoiding being the occasion of leading others to sin. The fathers were emphatic that if a man lusted, the woman at the very least shared the blame for his

lust. The harlots we will examine in Chapter 5 who turn to penitence come to it almost invariably through the agency of a strong holy man who confronts each with the danger she represents to the souls of others. 'Why are you causing the loss of so many souls so that you will be condemned to render an account not only of your own sins but of theirs as well?' is the formulaic question; the penitence of Thais, Paesia and Pelagia is for being the agent of their downfall more than her own. This is the attitude accepted by the anchoress Alexandra, formerly a maid-servant, who told Melania the Elder: 'A man was distressed in mind because of me and, in case I should seem to afflict or disparage him, I chose to take myself alive into the tomb rather than cause a soul made in the image of God to stumble.' To prevent this, she 'left the city and shut herself up in a tomb, receiving the necessities of life through an opening, seeing neither men nor women face to face for ten years'. Even those living under vows have the responsibility of guarding against precipitating the fall of others: the nuns at Hippo are told by Augustine, 'you are not forbidden to see men, but you must neither let your desire go out to them, nor wish to be objects of desire on their part'. A similar line of thinking is seen in the hermit Hilarion's cure of a Christian virgin from sickness reputedly caused by possession put upon her by the spells of a youth whose advances she had repeatedly resisted. Her resistance avails her little in his eyes: 'he reproved the girl when her health returned, for having by her imprudent conduct permitted the devil to gain control over her.' Despite her original steadfastness, hers is the responsibility in his eyes. A 'devout and God-fearing virgin of senatorial rank' was reviled by the eremitic Abba Arsenius, from whom she had sought edification while on pilgrimage from Rome, in essence for coming to him as a woman: 'How dare you make such a journey? do you not know that you are a woman and cannot go just anywhere?' The Archbishop Theophilus, who had been their unsuccessful go-between,

reinforced this: 'Do you not realise that you are a woman and it is through women that the enemy wars against the saints?' She evidently had known of his reason for refusing to see her, but had insisted on going anyway because her motives were pure: 'I trust in God to see him; men we have in our town, and I have come to see not a man but a prophet.' But even when it is 'a God-fearing virgin' visiting an old man 'dead to the flesh' enough examples of these discovering the persistent vitality of their flesh were known to justify his attitude; the woman must bear the responsibility of this risk and hold herself in isolation. [7] The attitude is the same towards the Agapetae or Virgines subintroductae (considered in more detail in Chapter 3) and their monks, those unmarried couples who advertised themselves as living together in an entirely spiritual union. If Scripture says that men who lust after women with their eyes have already committed adultery with them in their hearts (Matt. 5:27-28), then Chrysostom estimates these monks must be guilty of a thousand adulteries daily; and though both are guilty in this regard, he assigns the greater blame to the women, who he asserts, like prostitutes or adulteresses, were responsible for the man's madness. Further Jerome in the case of the mother and daughter in Gaul addressed in Letter 117 sternly admonishes the daughter who is living away from her mother under the aegis of a holy man as placing herself, and him in constant temptation; 'Why must you live in a house where you must daily struggle for life and death?' She is to mend her behaviour and if she will not part from her mentor, live obviously decently in the company of her mother. He even advises her not to walk abroad lest she be the occasion of lustful thoughts in others; our sources are adamant that the thought is as sinful as the deed. [8]

Thus the need for exaggerated modesty; the apostle again providing the pattern: 'if a woman has long hair, it is her glory; for long hair is given her as a covering', a text frequently cited by the Fathers, the need for covering equating with feminine modesty. 'Salvation consists in the exhibition principally of modesty'. Modest dress is to underline the difference between women of God and the rest, personal adornment is to be shunned: 'Let your dress be neither too neat nor too slovenly; in neither let it be so remarkable as to draw the attention of passers-by.' This modesty should extend to the virtuous woman's entourage as well as herself; 'sometimes the tone of the mistress is inferred from the dress of the maid.' And in the models offered for women to follow: 'She whom we are praising was unadorned, and the absence of ornament was beauty to her.' [9] Modesty should also be manifest in internal qualities as in outward appearance: pious women should guard their tongues as their beauty. Gregory of Nazianzus' female relatives were advanced as exemplary in that his mother, Nonna, 'was the kind who would sooner conceal something quite public than boast about private matters for vainglory'; and for his sister Gorgonia, though the men around her apparently 'regarded her counsels and advice as a law not to be broken', still 'who was less ready to speak, confining herself within the due limits of a woman?' Not only how they appeared to others, but where and when must be scrutinised: 'Christian women should not have the same cause to appear in public as gentile women ... all Christian occasions to go abroad are businesses of sobriety and sanctity' and it is not enough that God should know them to be chaste, 'let your probity appear before men'. Jerome goes further in his advice to Laeta about the rearing of Paula; she should never go in public. Thus also the exemplary Gorgonia: 'who was more deserving of renown, and yet who avoided it so much and made herself inaccessible to the eyes of men?' [10]

This might quite laudably be taken to the extremes of risking one's health to preserve bodily modesty. Gregories of Nyssa and Nazianzus both advance such situations as further proof that their respective sisters, Macrina and Gorgonia were exempla to good Christian women. Macrina was stricken with a deadly tumour on her breast, such that 'her mother implored her often and begged her to receive the attention of a doctor, since the medical art, she said, was sent from God for the saving of men. But she judged it worse than the pain to uncover any part of her body to a stranger's eyes'. Gorgonia was 'seriously injured' when her carriage overturned in an accident; but 'all crushed and bruised as she was in bones and limbs ... she would have no physician ... because she shrank from the observation and hands of men, preserving, even in suffering, her modesty'. Both women then prayed themselves back to good health. [11]

It is in keeping with this notion of women providing the occasion and carrying the burden of sins committed about them that Jerome also writes of Fabiola's sinful second union with Oceanus after divorcing her first husband; she was forbidden the church until, obeying 'Christ's laws, not Papinian's', she did extravagant penance and sold off her property for the poor and 'heroically undertook the blame of separation rather than the shame of the union'. Jerome is writing to Oceanus; there is no word of any penances or debarring on his part; though he has presumably committed adultery as well in the regard of Christian teaching, the blame rests with the woman. Macrina, sister of Gregory of Nyssa, then gave expression to the dilemma of this thought taken to its logical conclusions when she refused to consider a second betrothal after the death of the boy to whom she had been betrothed, 'since in the nature of things there was but one marriage, as there is one birth and one death' and, taking the stance that she

was as bound 'as if the intention had been accomplished in fact' she achieved the fame of being univira to add to her lustre of virginity. This may have been opportunistic reasoning on her part, but equally it expresses a very real potential ground for concern: we have seen the opprobrium endured by Fabiola and will be examining the elastic nature of Roman marriage conventions, thus Macrina might not unreasonably argue the wish for the deed to avoid the possibility of confusion on Judgement Day. [12]

But if too often seen as the occasion for sin, women were seen also as capable of making a significant contribution to the spiritual reserves of the church; within certain preconditions. If these preconditions for piety were met, women could fulfil the highest spiritual destiny: 'it would be shameful for every woman to think merely that she is a woman', wrote Clement of Alexandria; 'Women must seek wisdom, like men, even if men are superior and have first place in every field, at least if they are not effeminate.' [13] As we have seen in Ambrose, after care has entered the world through a woman, salvation comes through a virgin. It remains then to examine the conceptions of the later Church Fathers as to how these preconditions were to be met, and from what stances of informed purity women could fulfil roles within the church.

If women were essentially sinful because essentially sexual, the first and most obvious need was to negate that aspect of their nature - or, rather, stand it on its head. If 'woman represents the flesh and the passions' then 'he is truly male who ignores sin, which is to say female fragility'. This being so, 'Let us kiss him whose embrace is chastity. Let us have intercourse with him with whom marriage is virginity'. [14] In the fourth century, abstinence from the flesh becomes in the thinking of many of the patristic authors the equivalent to martyrdom; it equates with a willingness to suffer for

God such as Paul's testimony that he crucified himself to the world and the world to himself (Gal. 6:14). In the more puritanical, eschatologically-obsessed cultural climate of the later Empire, writers such as John Chrysostom may be found regretting that martyrdom, the ultimate in self-denial, was no longer possible for Christians and hinting that those who from their love of God struggle to overcome carnal lust and the world can expect the martyrs' reward. Firstly, then, there was an obvious need to liberate themselves from the distractions of the life of everyday; of the temporal world, not just thoughts of material life, but even the bonds of family life, and as far as possible in each individual case, from the flesh altogether. If at all possible, continence and chastity were to be embraced as a liberation from the subjection to sin, which then placed one in a state of more immediate availability to the agency of the Holy Spirit; of necessity then in most cases this entailed the loosening of the bonds of duty and affection to family. This finds repeated echoes in all our sources: 'The unmarried woman thinks on the things of the Lord to be holy; the married is solicitous to please her husband.' Similarly 'the man in the married state cannot pray without ceasing', so

> who wishes to prepare himself here for that Kingdom must hate, not the humans themselves, but those temporal relationships by which this life of ours is supported, this life which is ephemeral, which is played out in being born and dying. For the person who does not hate them does not yet love that life where there will be no circumstance of being born and dying.

And again:

> Marriage was not devised simply for the creation of children ... chastity is the preeminent reason for marriage, and is much more so at present, since our race has filled the whole world ... If you desire children ... spiritual birth pangs summon us, and worthier offspring, more useful to us in our old age. [15]

The corollary of this dismantling of social bonds was, of course, that the women who chose to implement this preaching became available as a

resource at the disposal of the bishops and their clergy; the proper protectors of avowed women. they would channel their energies and time newly available for the service of God (and attempt to channel their wealth, if any) to the services of the church.

This attitude puts in context the congratulatory tone with which the actions of Paula, Melania the Elder and Melania the Younger were greeted in our sources. In the previous centuries the martyrs Perpetua, Agathonice and Felicitas set their families at nought in their dedication - being besought by the crowd 'have pity on yourself and your children', Agathonice replies with an almost formulaic answer ascribed to female martyrs with families: 'My children have God who watches over them' - and Agape, Irene and Chione fled from their families for 'we think them worse than our enemies in fear they would denounce us' and were lauded in the sources for so doing. Similarly Paula merited admiration for leaving her family weeping on the quayside - her son Toxotius was still only a child, whom Jerome describes as 'extending supplicating hands on the shore' while 'Rufina, now a young woman, implored her mother with silent tears that she wait until her marriage' when she sailed for the Holy Land; Paula, like Agathonice 'raised dry eyes to heaven, overcoming her devotion to her children by her devotion to God ... she did not know herself as a mother that she might prove herself worthy as a handmaid of God'. Despite 'battling with grief as if she were being torn limb from limb ... she sought this with a rejoicing spirit, making little of the love of her children by her greater love for God'. And subsequently, when sent word of the serious illnesses of her children, and 'particularly of Toxotius, whom she loved dearly', Jerome says she simply thought of Christ's words: '"He that loveth son or daughter more than me in not worthy of me"' (contrast this, however, with his reports that at their subsequent deaths 'on each occasion the shock of

their loss endangered her life'). [16]

The same tone is evident in the accounts of Melania the Elder; she 'threw off the burdens of human love with the ropes of the ship, as all wept' when she left for the Holy Land. She is made to echo the female martyrs when she is described as having 'loved her child by neglecting him and kept him by relinquishing him', further that 'once Melania had torn her one son from her breast and set him in Christ's bosom so that the Lord himself might nourish him, she bestowed no subsequent personal care on him, for she thought it a sin of distrust to give her own attention to one whom she had entrusted to Christ'. She had to leave Rome less publicly than Paula, for she it seems was defying family and state; Paulinus of Nola, presumably himself privy to what must have been a family dispute, says 'the devil attempted through the utmost pressure of her noble relatives, whom he equipped to detain her, to ... prevent her from going'; and Palladius adds 'She told noone her plan, because she would have been prohibited at the time, since Valens held rule in the empire'. Melania was also less blessed than Paula with her family; of her three children, 2 died before she was widowed at 22, at which Jerome alleges she smiled and thanked God for her liberation; also he implies that Publicola was the same sort of age as the infant Toxotius when Paula left, whereas other evidence indicates that he was in fact set on the path to his later career. Melania's example inspired her granddaughter, Melania the Younger to her own extreme manifestations of piety: though, as will be considered later, her wish for poverty and abnegation were only set in opposition to the previous generation, since she was, to all intents, childless - one of the counts her family held against her. All this lends point to Jerome's statement that the woman dedicated to Eternal Life needs 'neither mother nor sister nor kinswoman nor brother'. Detachment from the family was advocated as right and necessary for

the woman pursuing the ascetic life, very much as the earlier female martyrs were 'in noticeable isolation from their families, in defiance of rather than in loyalty to, their husbands and fathers, and demonstrating a surprising eagerness to abandon young infants'. [17]

In fact, we may discern in some of the Fathers the onset of uneasiness at the fervour with which some women were embracing this particular aspect of the devotional lifestyle. Separation from the trammels of the family was an admirable goal, but in some cases difficulties arose because of the tendencies of ascetically inspired women to make a unilateral declaration of their intentions to observe this. Ambrose was put in an awkward position when a girl from his congregation attempted to preempt family opposition by running up to the altar in mid-service and wrapping the altar-cloth round her as if a veil, pleading for consecration as a virgin. When a relative protested: '"do you think your father would allow you to remain unmarried if he were alive?' the girl replied "Perhaps he died so that noone could oppose this."' Ambrose solemnly adjures virgins in like case: 'Conquer family feeling first; if you overcome your household, you overcome the world.' [18]

Similarly onesided decisions in the case of married women created a dilemma which puts the authorities who had inspired them to some uncomfortable shuffling. Continence in marriage was admirable; but those who seized on the exhortations to implement it without making certain that their husbands concurred were obeying the apostle in one thing but disobeying him in another: 'Wives, respect your husbands', for 'it is evident that she is subjected to the man and that the subjection is because of sin' according to Augustine. Thus the pious married woman was caught in a double bind; she was under subjection because of sin and the bonds of subjection to sin are broken by choosing celibacy; but by choosing celibacy she was brought up against

that very subjection she was attempting to escape. Augustine heavily rebuked the matron Ecdicia for unilaterally making the decision that her marriage was henceforth to be a continent one and talking her reluctant husband into acquiescing (along with some fairly extreme displays of largesse and self-abasement); he subsequently falls into fornication which Augustine is adamant is Ecdicia's fault. Even the personal adornment that negates modesty was subject to this obedience; elsewhere, Augustine wrote, 'only for their husbands ought women to be permitted to adorn themselves', even if 'according to the tolerance, not the injuncture of scripture'. Thus the woman again shoulders the responsibility for sin; attempting to avoid the sin of carnality she once more becomes 'the sword that destroys', the occasion for another's sin. [19]

The questions of volition and discretion in its application are stressed in all our sources as being of primary importance in this vexed matter of abstinence. Time and time again in the middle of an exhortation on the beauties of chastity, as if drawing back from the treacherous ground, the authorities will add that of course this is not to be lightly undertaken, nor even attempted if there is thought the possibility of failure. They are all emphatic that chastity is a grace, 'a gift from God': not all can or should consider continence, according to Augustine. Clement of Alexandria said 'there is no other way to receive continence except by the grace of God'; likewise that Christians should 'bless sexual abstinence in those to whom this condition has been given by God', but also 'marvel at monogamy and the great majesty of a single marriage, for we think that we should suffer with each other and 'bear one another's burdens' [Gal. 6:2] lest anyone who believes he is standing firm all by himself should fall [I Cor. 10:12]'. The writers on the desert life give many examples of monks and virgins who were betrayed by their assumption that they

could keep bodily purity by their own prudence. Ambrose's distinction between marriage and virginity is that 'the one is under law, the other under grace'. [20] Even Jerome, who blesses 'marriage because it brings me virgins' also says that 'only those to whom it is given' should be virgins. He himself is 'a eunuch by choice', and the volition sanctifies it still further; it is 'better if it is freely offered' - though he mourns that not more choose so to offer it. He also warns, in one of his most extreme statements for virginity and against marriage, the Against Jovinian:

> if all were able to be virgins, the Lord would never have said, "He who can receive this, let him receive it" [Matt. 19:12] and the Apostle would not have wavered in his recommendation, "About virgins, however, I have no commandment from the Lord" [I Cor. 7:25].

and mourns 'Do not fear that all will become virgins: virginity is a difficult business and is rare just because it is hard'. Even in this, however, Jerome subtly increases the pressure on the choice. In the New Testament Greek, Jesus' advice is 'o dunamenos chorein, choreito': 'chorein' signifying 'receive' or 'accept with the intellect'. Jerome in the Vulgate translated this by using 'qui potest capere, capiat': turning a rather metaphysical quality into a more direct impulse. Jerome may have been cautious as to the welfare of his flock and the realities of the situation, as were Augustine and Clement; alternatively, he was bearing in mind the finite limits to the number of souls that can practicably be saved by this means; 'it is better to submit to marriage with a man than strain for the heights and fall to the depths of hell' [21]. This offers little enough consolation for those wishing for continence and refraining for reasons other than personal weakness. The mother of Gregory of Nyssa and Macrina, Emmelia, is alleged by her son to have very much wished for the life embraced by her daughter but feared abduction or forcible marriage, being very beautiful and completely without family; so practiced discretion in marrying a known and safe young man and

perhaps transmitted her urgings for piety to the next generation. But for those in a fortunate enough situation to be able to, and disposed to, heed the call, the volitional aspect of the choice for continence looms large in the Fathers' consciousness with regard to the justification of celibacy, although they may, like Jerome, tend to the attitude that all could if they but would. [22]

This caution in the writings suggests a need to defend the course being advocated against critics within and without the main body of the church; Jerome's work cited above, the Against Jovinian indicates typical accusations. One of the dangers of advocating too extreme a form of celibacy was to risk running into accusations of dangerous doctrine. Such attacks as Jovinian's, imputing near-heresy to Jerome's works cut very close to the bone - and provoked an extreme and pungently ad hominem reply. Jovinian had written a popular book defending marriage in which he argued that virgins, widows, and married women were all equal once they passed through Christan baptism: superior merit was not to be accorded to celibacy. Jerome has to protect himself against the accusation of heresy: 'Indeed, we do not follow the teachings of Marcion and Mani; we do not disparage marriage, nor do we judge all sexual intercourse foul. We have not been deceived by the error of Tatian, the head of the Encratites' - the last-named an extremely ascetic sect of Christians that flourished in the late second century, which, along with the equally reviled Severians and Naasenes practiced a particularly rigorous asceticism and regarded women and marriage as the works of Satan; Jerome's ascetic advice sometimes seemed to come very close to these in spirit, if not in detail. Nevertheless, despite these statements, the Against Jovinian contains matter so derogatory of marriage that his friends attempted to remove the book from circulation. Jerome also highlights another often-repeated criticism of celibacy: 'But you will say, "If

all people were virgins, how would the human race continue?" ... On this line of reasoning, there will be nothing at all, lest something else cease to be.' [23] This is something also found in Augustine's On the Good of Marriage, which is a more moderate answer to the same treatise. Augustine's answer is that marriage is to prevent sin, but that if all the world did become celibate and the race ceased it would be no bad thing: 'Would to heaven that everybody might wish this ... the City of God would be more quickly filled and the end of the world hastened.' John Chrysostom also uses the "Last Days" argument to counter this objection; earlier races desired children 'because they had no hope of the resurrection' as a remnant of themselves, but 'since the future resurrection is at the doors ... and we will travel to another life that is better than the present one, anxiety over these issues is superfluous'. [24]

The defensiveness felt over these positions, and the criticism levelled at the advocates of celibacy, not just from the fringes of the church but from the established mainstream is a fair indication of the hold that these writers were gaining, such as to cause consternation amongst more comfortable clerics. Witness also Jerome's difficulties with the church in Rome while resident there; and the coldness displayed by Pope Siricius to Paulinus of Nola during the latter's visit to Rome in 395, fairly certainly because of his stance on asceticism. Jerome was right to worry about his status with regard to orthodoxy, given his unpopularity; a far more popular (at Rome) advocate of fairly extreme asceticism, Pelagius, achieved in 415 the status of a heretic despite his previous standing with the Roman upper classes, mainly due to the attacks on him by Augustine. His message to the times had the virtue of simplicity, but was terrifying in its implications: 'Since perfection is possible for men, it is obligatory.' Nor was Pelagius without his supporters in this extremism

- Augustine's epistolary friend Paulinus of Nola amongst them. And Augustine was particularly alarmed when Pelagius had the temerity to address his views to Proba, Juliana and Demetrias, and Albina, Melania the Younger and Pinianus; these strong-minded aristocratic women whom Augustine regarded as to some extent protegés were fertile ground for Pelagius' picture of such a commanding role in such an influential movement. And the popularity of his views must have been particularly galling to those like Jerome, who had been so victimized by the counter-impulses to elevate normal marital conditions such as drove Jovinian and Helvidius into writing; by these standards, his position, regarded as highly sensitive by so many, was moderate indeed. But after a prolonged campaign by the African bishops, Pelagianism was condemned by the Emperor and Pope, and such extremism gradually lost its purchase on upper-class piety. [25]

Taking all sides into consideration, however, a pattern is evident: for Christian women of this era, justification was not achieved by faith, or even by deeds on their own; it was achieved by observing a system of degrees of sanctity on a fairly ordered and logical progression. This system was related directly to their sexual and marital status: but according to some writers alleviated by the attitude of mind in which they undertook to follow their chosen sexual condition. We see this at work in the rhetoric applied to Paula and Ecdicia: the former being attributed with the glory pertaining from a continent marriage without the reality, because it was said she sincerely wished for such a condition, while the latter had this route of 'the wish for the deed' strongly recommended to her in preference to undertaking real continence.

The issues centre around the marital bond. One of the greatest controversies of this period was based on the ascetic dilemma of whether or not to recommend marriage to the many. Given that 'she that is married is careful for the things of the world, how she may please her husband', yet still, 'it is better to marry than to burn'. This encapsulates the difficulty for the ascetics. Paul expressed a wish - but not a command - that 'all were as I am' i.e. celibate. [26] This is, then, to be recommended; but as not all are capable, how strongly? After all, marriage was not without its own rewards for asceticism: 'I praise marriage because it gets me virgins' and Proba and Juliana were told that they had gained more glory 'in giving to Christ women consecrated to his service than in giving to the world men called to the honours of the consulship' - namely themselves and Juliana's virgin daughter Demetrias. Marriage for the purpose of incubating piety was seen as eminently laudable. The Fathers were torn between the need to exhort their flocks to more exacting efforts for greater rewards, and the need to soft-pedal a course fraught with difficulties and greater penalties for failure. In that celibacy was a higher path to virtue, it could not be recommended strongly enough; but in that some might try it and fail, thus being worse off spiritually than before, great caution was needed. As we have seen, being the cause of another's downfall is as culpable as backsliding oneself; thus occurs the collective neurosis about being too extreme and so tempting weaker vessels to failure. Such extremism resulted in the proscription of formerly respected clerics such as Pelagius, and the suspicion that anyone strongly recommending the higher path must, of necessity, be condemning marriage; a suspicion Jerome has to counter time and again.

Further, the lunatic fringe of those adopting these advocations was bringing the whole movement into disrepute: held up as a model for scorn and derision were females such as the camp-followers of the circumcelliones, 'those troops of homeless women who have declined matrimony that they may avoid restraint'. The Synod of Gangra of 340 saw a need to forbid women to cut their hair and dress like a man; also condemning Eustathius of Sebaste, an ascetic rejecting marriage. The Marcionites from whom we saw Jerome needing to dissociate himself, while disparaging marriage allowed women complete sexual freedom, since they advocated sexual freedom for all as compatible to Christian faith (including homosexuality and paedophilia). Also to be avoided were the female religious dedicatees around Hierakas, the revered ascetic leader in Egypt. He was taken to task by Athanasius for disparaging that married persons had any place in Paradise; and expected his followers to be ministered to by virgin female companions without mishap. Ambrose was the target of another group of uncontrolled women, this time Arians, promoting their religious differences in justification of disorderly behaviour on the occasion of his consecration of Anemius in the disputed see of Sirmium. One of them 'more impudent than the rest' mounted the tribunal and seized him by his clothing, attempting to drag him to her companions 'so that they might beat him and drive him from the church'. Ambrose's response was to warn her of God's judgement (afterwards wreaked on her in her premature death), for '"even if I am unworthy of so great a bishopric, it is not fitting that you or your kind lay hands on any bishop of whatever sort"' - 'your kind' referring whether to Arians or to women is less than clear. These women were attached to heretical movements, and could therefore safely be lambasted for their violent behaviour; but much of the fervour of patristic authors such as Augustine on the circumcellione women arose out of their need to dissociate their own favoured celibates from such accusations. It

expresses an anxiety about the ends to which their own preaching can be put; thus they need to draw distinctions between these hoydens and devout Catholic women and to assert their faith in the orthodoxy of the motives of their own side that they may not be accused of fostering such tendencies. [27]

Such anxieties set the Jerome-Jovinian controversy in context. Not merely another of the interminable wrangles in which Jerome became embroiled because of his confrontational theology and his acerbic pen, it also expresses the tremors of a school of thought frightened by its own logical conclusion. There seems to have existed in addition a genuine confusion about the relative merit of chastity as set against the married state; and when some clerics maintained their equality, their works were gratefully received by many. Jovinian, and before him, Helvidius, against whom Jerome's treatise on The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary is written, had tempered the party line on chastity to suit those less inclined to asceticism. 'You compelled me [to write], Helvidius; for, brightly as the Gospel shines at the present day, you will have it that equal glory attaches to virginity and to the marriage state.' Helvidius in fact concluded that virginity was ranked below matrimony, appealing to the mention in the Gospels of 'sisters' and 'brethren' of Christ, and supporting his opinion with the writings of Tertullian and Victorinus. Jovinian asserted that '"virgins, widows and married women, who have been once passed through the laver of Christ, if they are on a par in other respects, are of equal merit"'. Jovinian also held that the birth of Christ had been by a 'true parturition' and so contravened the orthodoxy of the time, according to which the infant Jesus passed through the walls of the womb as His resurrected body did afterwards out of the tomb or through the closed doors. Thus Jovinian was not just controversial but adjudged to be heretical, and his book was condemned in synods at Rome

and Milan at around 390, after Jerome's friend and patron Pammachius had brought it to the notice of Pope Siricius. [28]

However, Jovinian's views were expressive of the unease felt by many at the time - Jerome attests to his success in influencing those who have already vowed virginity to marry [29] - notwithstanding his lack of orthodoxy. The furious tone of Jerome's treatise against him was scarcely, one might have thought, to be expected for a treatise defending accepted orthodoxy. 'They affirm that to preach up chastity till no comparison is left between a wife and a virgin is equivalent to a condemnation of matrimony' and Jerome must assert at length that to prefer virginity is not to condemn marriage, reiterating his comparison of gold with silver, of the 100-fold with the 30-fold; his faults as they have been judged, he asseverates bitterly, are not in fact his at all, he is merely expounding the apostle who is the first to make the distinction; but that 'whilst he applauds those who lead the van, he does not despise those who bring up the rear'. The issue as Jerome sees it is clear: of two paths one is preferable, but the other lawful; one brings great rewards, the other moderate rewards. 'The nuptial tie is not to be avoided as a crime but to be refused as a hard burden'. [30] As one who had previously defended a twice-married bishop as being within the bounds of lawfulness and advised against the individual in question being pilloried (if only because of his cynical rider that, after all 'the whole world is filled with persons ordained in similar circumstances'), his bewilderment at the charges levelled at him with regard to his orthodoxy is understandable; 'I have said that there are diversities of gifts in the Church, and that virginity is one gift and wedlock another ... Can it be said that I condemn that which in the clearest terms I declare to be the gift of God?' 'From all considerations it is clear that I have said nothing at all new concerning virginity and

marriage, but have followed in all respects the judgement of ... Ambrose and others who have discussed the doctrines of the Church'. [31] But the furore was equally understandable given the pungency with which Jerome expressed his preference: '[The Apostle] did not say, it is good not to have a wife: but it is good not to touch a woman, as though there were danger even in the touch: as though he who touched her would not escape from her who "hunteth for the precious life", who causeth the young man's understanding to fly away.' While not actually condemning marriage, - 'Do I condemn marriage if I enumerate its troubles, such as the crying of infants, the death of children, the chance of abortion, domestic losses and so forth?' - Jerome has been quite justly charged with bringing it into disrepute. He is carefully within the law also on his statements on marrying more than once; 'I do not condemn digamists or trigamists, or even, to put an extreme case, octagamists' - and with statements such as 'it is more tolerable for a woman to prostitute herself to one man than to many' who could fail to be reassured? To say 'Wedlock is like a plank offered to a shipwrecked man and by its means you may remedy what previously you have done amiss' is not, by the letter of the law, to pronounce it condemned, certainly; but it is small wonder that Pammachius and Jerome's other friends were so anxious to withold the treatise from publication, however unsuccessfully. [32] The most literal orthodoxy did not save Jerome from once again provoking those afraid or unwilling to regard the Apostle's dictates on marriage in their strictest sense.

Practical considerations: asceticism and the age of consent

The situation being such, devout Christian women of the time had to make a choice. Marriage, or rather, marriage in its full sexual capacity was the great divide as to the standard by which one's devoutness was judged; the choice was between the acquisition of merit

through abnegation of one's sexual capacity, or encompassment of one's devotions within it. We should here consider, however, the practicalities and the force of external factors on such a decision-making process. For some, the idea of a choice was purely notional - the choice was thrust upon them. A consideration of pre-eminent importance in the study of women in the context of patristic ideology is the backdrop of Late Roman society with concomitant social and peer pressure in favour of marriage and particularly for early marriage - by our standards - in the circles most accessible to our view, the aristocracy and minor nobility. That girls could be married 'too early' was not a concept that had much meaning in Roman eyes, a fact bemoaned by Roman writers and doctors [33]; while the Codex Justinianus renews a law stating the legal minimum age of marriage for girls was 12 (14 for boys) it seems to have been one of the leges imperfectae, that is, neither threatening their violators with penalties nor invalidating their transgression, and cases of girls married before their twelfth year were not uncommon. [34] Examining this trend, M.K. Hopkins argues that there was nothing terribly out of the way in pre-pubescent marriages in an age which seems to have placed puberty in the fourteenth year but legalized marriage for girls in the 12th year and cites, amongst other evidence, the epitaphs penned by two Christian writers, Agathias and Paulus Silentiarius to girls who died aged 12 and 14 describing them as ripe for marriage in support of an earlier rather than a later view of the ideal marriageable age. [35] Brent Shaw, taking a wider sample of evidence, has argued that modes of age at first marriage in the Western Roman Empire as a whole tended to be skewed more typically towards the late teens - taking as the basis for his deductions the mean age at which parents 'decline' as the commemmorating party and husbands take over in funerary dedications to dead girls. This is necessary because of the difficulty in finding inscriptions attesting

length of marriage and age at death from outside the limited sphere of urban Italy, and specifically the City of Rome; but it does bring its own difficulties of knowing how long the young couples attested in the sample had been married. However, Shaw indicates the strong probability that evidence based on City dwellers as gathered in the Harkness and Leclerq samples is not evidential for the general trend. [36]

Against this, the evidence of the medical writings and beliefs of the time must be borne in mind. It is clear that Roman doctors made - and went on making - some fundamental anatomical errors about female reproduction: for instance that the vagina was sealed completely by an internal membrane between the womb and the hymen; and that intercourse induced menstruation. These were the result partly of their seclusion from the centre of operations at childbirth and all examinations prior to it; but more specifically because of the prevalent custom of pre-pubescent marriage of the girls concerned - as was repeatedly, and vainly, pointed out to them by such Greek-trained doctors as Soranus of Ephesus, who directed his writings particularly at the fathers of girls, in an effort to persuade them not to have their daughters married before menstruation. This tends to indicate, that, within certain understood perimeters, the sample of Harkness and Leclerq is usable: it and the medical evidence show that girls did marry at ages earlier even than those allowed for in the law, given that the law may have provided for what it considered to be the lowest likely age of marriage rather than the most typical. Nor is the fact that this evidence is of a specialised nature a detraction for this study: in being City-based and aristocratic-centred, it coincides with much of the literary evidence for the period and further illustrates the difficulties encountered by the would-be ascetic out of the top drawer of Roman society. Certainly Plutarch, writing about

what he knows, to an audience of shared experience, says 'the Romans...give their maidens in marriage when they are twelve years or even younger. In this way more than any other, it was thought both their beds and their dispositions would be pure and undefiled when their husbands took control of them'. [37]

Something increasing the pressure towards marriage for girls which needs stating from the point of view of today's historian is that the Romans (in any age) seem to have had no concept, as no instances, of 'surplus women'. Though evidence on the prevalence of the custom of exposure of infants is hard to come by (though it was not prohibited till 374) Dio comments on the fewer women than men in the freeborn population of 18 BC; Jane Gardner has pointed out that this is 'demographically surprising' and concludes that the imbalance of sexes increased the incidence of marriage at an early age. There is no word in Latin for 'spinster': 'before Christianity consecrated celibacy unmarried adult women must have been rare.' [38] In the upper classes, daughters marry until in the fourth century they begin to opt out; a norm difficult properly to grasp for those with today's long sociological and literary history of 'redundant' women and of marriage as a desirable and frequently unattainable goal. For many girls the possibility of declining marriage was out of their hands in any case. A woman sui iuris like Marcella (widowed at an early enough age to make remarriage a reasonably automatic assumption for her mother Albina) might exercise choice against marrying even 'a husband, not a fortune'; for prospective partners still in potestatate, the relevant parties whose consent was required to validate the marriage were their patres. Paul the jurist says that marriages should not take place without the minors' consent but that in the case of it happening, the marriage should not be dissolved; Ulpian is of the opinion that the daughter's consent can only be withheld in the event of the pater

selecting someone morally undesirable. [39]

In late Roman times, then, even if the girl concerned escaped the heavier manifestations of patria potestas, her ascetic inclinations must combat a social expectation tantamount to coercion towards marriage and that at an age which, if not considered premature [40], was too soon to encounter in the girl involved a realistic faculty for making such a momentous decision (except in the case of a Eustochium, with a strong familial counter-influence); from the standpoint of the traditionalists, perhaps, one of the advantages of the system. One should remember that this is a factor affecting men in our period, too: Pachomius was faced with an enforced marriage by his pagan family; and Abba Amoun had been compelled into marriage, either by 'rich parents who forced him to marry against his will', or, in Palladius' more detailed version, 'being unable to resist the pressure of his uncle' who was his paterfamilias. However, the men manifest more capacity to alter the state imposed on them than do the girls: Pachomius fled before his marriage could take place; Amoun, 'when they had compelled him to [marry] ... persuaded the girl in the bridal chamber that they should preserve their virginity in secret' which they did for some eighteen years, by Palladius' account, until he departed for Nitria, leaving her to convert her household and turn her house into a monastery. In the case of girls, Peter Brown theorizes that in some cases the choice for abnegation was, as it were, carried over a generation by being passed on to one of the children; Martha the mother of Simeon the Younger of Antioch raised her son from the start with the intention that he should become a stylite, since her own yearning for sanctity had been cut short by an arranged marriage, against her will. This is another consequence of an early marriageable age; it is interesting to speculate on how many of our notable ascetics were the product of maternal repinings over a

thwarted longing for 'the desert'. Aline Rousselle similarly postulates that for this reason virginity treatises were more directed towards the mothers of promising daughters, who would in all likelihood be too young to act upon them, even if they did understand them. There are many obvious such examples: Paula with Eustochium, Juliana with Demetrias, Avita with Eunomia. [41]

It is possible that Christianity does have a tangential effect on Roman society in respect of marital age for girls. From specifically Christian ranks is revealed a trend leading away from societal norms of marriage at the earliest viable age. This is observed in Hopkins' analysis of the age of marriage of Christian girls as compared with that of pagan girls, derived from the collation of funerary inscriptions (mostly from CIL) from which the age of the girls concerned at marriage can be ascertained. The striking factor in this study, as he notes, is that the modal [42] age at marriage of pagan girls was 12 to 15 (43.41 %) while for Christian girls it was 15 to 18 (41.67 %). As Brent Shaw has indicated, however, this may be a social phenomenon rather than a religious one: he notes that typical inscriptions from the 'pagan' set 'are usually reasonably elaborate stones, with a five to ten line epitaph inscribed in fair to excellent letter-cutting, and with the occasional addition of a funerary portrait of the deceased, often in a conjugal or familial setting' while the Christian inscriptions 'can be perceived at first glance, even by the non-expert, as produced out of an entirely different social milieu. Their quality is exceedingly poor'. From this evidence it may be the case, as Shaw argues, that the 'Christian' inscriptions merely provide us with an insight into the free poor and poor of distant servile origins of Rome, to whom the habit of funerary commemmoration was spreading after the beginning of the fourth century, rather than being peculiarly 'Christian'. But, as he

indicates, the definably 'pagan' evidence is predominantly from the more well-off classes; so given the lack of any real evidence from the point of view of the 'pagan' free and servile poor, this assumption is surely as unfounded - or as reliable - as that of Hopkins and others. All that can be inferred realistically from these samples, backed up by our literary sources, is their strong upper-class bias, Christian and pagan, towards early marriage. This brings additional complications. While girls may have first married in their late teens, Richard Saller has shown that men tended to begin marrying in their mid to late twenties with modes in the range of 27 to 30, and hence an age-gap of ten or more years between husband and wife was fairly typical. However, the indications are that upper-class patterns of marriage exaggerated this tendency towards an age-gap, since modes of marriage for girls were significantly lower, but for men were probably much the same as those of men in the lower classes; and this wider gap between husband and wife would have significant implications for reproduction, conjugal relations, widowhood and remarriage, and the devolution of property. [43]

This sets the scene for much of our literary evidence: our writers show us Melania the Elder married at 14 by parental command and widowed by her 22nd year, Marcella, a youthful widow after only 7 months of marriage resisting a remarriage with the elderly Neriatius Cerialis, Melania the Younger married in her 13th year and Macrina provided with a husband (though the marriage never actually happened because of his sudden death) in her 12th year [44]. This is to say, in fact, that of our most prominent examples of asceticism, both of virginity and widowhood, those out of the top-drawer are particularly unusual in their precociousness and/or determination in their decisions; presumably since more subject to familial pressure towards an early marriage or a swift remarriage. This sheds new light on the

over-reported struggle of the over-represented aristocratic women; as it is disproportionately represented, so perhaps it was disproportionately difficult. Those who had, like Melania the Younger and Eustochium, to 'take on' their family to adopt asceticism fight not only the social norm towards marriage as inevitable, but also the class tendency towards the earlier end of the marriageable age scale - which, as the inscriptions of two girls married at 6 and 7 respectively [45] indicate, could start early indeed. This puts Eustochium's decision for virginity at around the age of 10 in a relatively mature light, and Demetrias' decision just before her projected marriage at 14 is towards the upper end of the aristocratic curve; by the standards of Agathius and Paulus Silentiarius - and many other Roman authors - she would have been regarded as highly nubile. Girls of this age were also considered as being responsible for their own actions in this respect - to the extent that legal advice existed for husbands and concubines wanting to bring charges of adultery against partners of younger than 12. [46]

In the light of Christian eschatological ideas, this kind of conditioning gives rise to a certain amount of doublethinking on the parts of concerned parents, and some examples of social anxiety resulting in external attempts to regulate the norm. Little else could explain the instance of Praetextata and Hymettius' interference with the pre-pubescent Eustochium's upbringing and expectations; by fairly crude means, given the pervasive nature of her counter-conditioning. They offer her the temptations of personal adornment, rich dresses and so on, presumably imagining that any 'right-minded' girl of her age could not fail to be won over thus. Jerome exults over their failure and attributes Praetextata's premature death soon after to divine retribution for this attempt to subvert one of God's chosen virgins [47]. However, this must have

been less than convincing in an age where the comparatively youthful death of a wife was a sufficiently regular occurrence, as witness the cases of all three of Eustochium's sisters; though only one of them had died before she left Rome, the probabilities of surviving many years of marriage and child-birth were never better than evens; a consideration which must have weighed with the pre-pubescent child. But Praetextata was not just representing social pressure or anti-Christian older generation opinion: she might well also have been properly worried about her niece's health if she followed this odd path. The gaps in the knowledge of Roman doctors extended to dire prognostications as to the dangers of delayed defloration. Conceivably, Praetextata was influenced by the opinions of doctors such as Rufus (cited by Oribasius, a court doctor in the 4th century) that illness such as plethora, overabundance of humours, and the attendant problems threatened girls who stayed virgins too long. [48] Perhaps she would have met with more success had she waited a little, for the occurrence of the 'hasty desires' in girls that Macrobius considers the explanation for marriage at 12, accounting for it by the greater degree of heat in girls. Perhaps, indeed, this is the reason for the epigraphic evidence of later marriages for Christian girls: the length of time needed for them to be "warmed" out of a desire for nundom by the onset of puberty. However, to back her position, Eustochium - and the others like her - might have read and, given her sisters' experience, believed Soranus, that 'among women we see that those who, for reasons of rules of service to the Gods have forsworn intercourse and those who have been kept virgins as ordained by law are less susceptible to disease' while married women did not enjoy good health. [49]

Another case of external regulations of behaviour is the attitude of the (Christian) crowd at Paula's funeral, and their interpretation of Paula's behaviour:

> "Isn't this what we've said? She weeps for her daughter, killed with fasting; she wanted her to marry again, that she might have grandchildren...They've misled this unhappy lady; that she's not a nun from choice is clear." [50]

This is significant as a protest at the current drift of opinion in a century notable for more frequent decisions against marriage and a higher rate of continent widowhood (backed up even by the law; from the 4th century the legal minimum interval between the death of a husband and re-marriage was one year, as opposed to the previous tradition of 10 months with legal penalties for those not swift to remarry [51]). Jerome uses this as a stick to beat Paula, by contrast with the crowd's normative position; her attitudes were 'unfitting', even 'detestable' in a Christian mother: Blesilla will say 'she is not my mother who displeases my Lord'. [52] Nonethless, we have only Jerome's word (backed by Paula's emotional fervour in later life) that she did not in fact expect and look forward to the prospect of the continuation of her (earthly) family through grand-children; there is nothing to say that she did not feel in fact two ascetic women in the family to be enough for heavenly preeminence, leaving the earthly branch to carry on with the temporal notability.

The most notable example of a familial attempt to impose conformity on the part of Christian parents was that of Publicola and Albina taking legal action against their daughter Melania the Younger and her husband to thwart their ascetic endeavours, on the grounds that they were in potestate, more overtly motivated by the dangers to the family property that Melania and Pinianus were disposing of so blithely. Nonetheless, Melania had married in the first instance despite a wish to follow the example of Publicola's own mother (Melania the Elder), and even twice attempted to produce an heir, due

to familial expectations. [53]

The Church writers of the 4th Century were bringing new tendencies to bear in the family, as we will examine in Chapter 4, with the increasing dissemination of monastic ideals through a wider section of society. In the East the tendency was still for the World and the Desert to be distinct from each other, though the World would call on the resources of the Desert for arbitration and protection; Western writers such as Augustine and Jerome were introducing elements of the Desert into the life of the World, attempting to make these values a relevant part of life incumbent on every believer - a shared and heavy responsibility.

This, then, is the basis of the stratification into which the treatment of the pious woman settles in the works of the later Fathers, the formulaic reiteration of the theme of 'thirty-fold, sixty-fold, one hundred-fold': the need to find an expression of the legitimacy of marriage and conjugal relations within a wider context of other conditions. Abstinence was not peculiarly a Christian contribution to late antique society but was the logical outcome of the social repression of women's sexuality and pagan experiments with continence for religious reasons (such as the worship of Cybele); but adopted by the Christians it acquired a new regularity and resonance. This represents the purchase gained by the early Christian belief in 'the doctrine of sexuality as a "privileged" symptom of personal transformation', in Peter Brown's resounding phrase; that its avoidance was the sign of a greater commitment, possession of which rendered one in a condition of unhesitating availability to God and one's community. This state was also a signpost to outsiders, hence the obsessive worrying about all the appurtenances of modesty and the constantly reiterated frets 'that you might not give scandal to unbelievers'. It is, further, the victory of the 'morality of the

socially vulnerable' over the morals of the aristocracy, spearheaded by the aristocratic women who adopted preaching on asceticism with such disturbing alacrity. What, then, to advise to those swelling the groups living under vows - representing all that more house-bound, and thus earth-bound women should aspire to - the Orders of widows and virgins, was a source of worry to not only the moderates, but even, as we have seen, often caused grave anxiety to those proselytes of ascesis whose counsel they were obeying. These orders, in their purest forms, represent in the 4th century the logical end of the preaching of the Fathers as directed to women: those who have heeded the call to complete abnegation and the mathematical progressions of acquired virtue such that 'the thirtyfold [harvest referred to in the Parable of the sower] refers to marriage ... the sixtyfold to widows ... the one hundredfold .. expresses the crown of virginity'. [54] The patristic authors were not merely relegating women to a more confined, because defined, condition; they were also the victims of their own ascetic conditioning, and the heirs to a dilemma given first expression, and no solution, by the Apostle.

We have seen how theories on marriage and virginity contained advice both on the conditions in themselves and in relation to the outside world. We shall now consider how this worked in practice in the cases of women who made different choices: and will begin with the choice of piety through continence.

1. I Tim 2:12 Romans 16:1; 16:2; 16:12
2. I Cor. 11:3;
3. I Tim 2:12 & 14
4. Cf Elizabeth A. Clark, Women in the Early Church, p. 16
5. Homily 9 on I Timothy 1; On the Epistle to the Ephesians. PG 42.148; Paulinus, Let. 23.24; Ambrose Let. 42.3
6. On the Dress of Women. 2.2
7. cf. Life of Thais the Harlot, Life of Saint Pelagia the Harlot and Alphabetical Collection of the Apophthtegmata Patrum. John the Dwarf 40. LH 5; Aug. Let. 211.10; Jer. Life of St. Hil. 21; Alph. Arsenius 28; for examples of monks and virgins failing to resist each other's temptation cf. the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum 176 & 178 and 13
8. Hom. 17 Matt. 2; Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant 1
8. Let. 117.2 & 7
9. I Cor. 11:15; Dress of Women. 2.1; Jer. Lets.22.27. 54.12; Greg. Naz. Or. 8. In Praise of his Sister Gorgonia 3;
10. Greg. Naz. On his Life 65; Or. 8.10; Tert. Dress of Women. II.13; Greg. Naz. Or. 8.9; Jer. Let 107.8
11. Greg. Nyssa, Life of Mac. col. 992B; Greg. Naz. Or. 8.15 - though cf. also ch. 17 in which it is illuminating, that two short chapters later Gregory seems to forget this point, when he tells us that Gorgonia was stricken with 'an extraordinary and malign disease' of such virulence that 'the skill of physicians who carefully examined the case, both singly and in consultation, was of no avail.'
12. Let. 77; Gregory of Nyssa, Life of St. Macrina, col. 964C-D
13. Paedagogus, PG 8.429; Stromata, PG 8.1275
14. Origen, in Exod., PG 12.305; in Levit., PG 12.188
15. John Chrys. Hom. 5 on I Thess.; Tert. To his Wife 1.3; Let. 22.22; Aug. On the Sermon on the Mount I.15.40; John Chrys. Hom. on I Cor. 7:2 3
16. In H. Musurillo, Acts of the Christian Martyrs pp 34-5. 288-289; Jer. Let. 108.3. 19. 21
17. Paulinus Let. 29.9-10; LH 46; Jer. Let. 39.1 & 5; LH 61; Mary Lefkowitz: "Perpetua: Motivations for her Martyrdom" in JAAR 44 (76)
18. Amb. De Virginibus 1.11.63-66.
19. Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22; Aug. Discourse 4 on Genesis 2; Lets 262.1 ff.; 245
20. On the Good of Widowhood 5; On Continence; Clem. of Alex. Concerning Righteousness 3.7.57; Amb. Let. 42.3
21. Jer. Let. 22.20 - just as he alleges that Blesilla 'mourned the loss of her virginity more than the loss of her husband; Let. 22.19; Against Jovinian I.36; Let. 22.6
22. Greg. of Nyssa. Mac. col. 962A-C - significantly it was Emmelia who named Macrina also Thecla as a secret name for her dream that she was bearing 'a new Thecla'
23. Ag. Jov. 1.3 & 36
24. On the Good of Marriage 9; Hom. on I Cor. 7:2
25. Jer. Ap. 3.22; Let. 45.5; Paulinus of Nola Let. 17; Pelagius in PL 30.15-45. 'Pelagius never doubted for a moment that perfection was obligatory; his God was, above all, a God who commanded unquestioning obedience. He had made men to execute his commands; and he condemned to hellfire anyone who failed to perform a single one of them.' So Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo p. 342
26. I Cor. vii.7-8, 32-33

27. Aug. Let. 150 & 35.2; Eustathius, cf. Aline Rousselle, Porneia, p. 186; Hierakas cited in A History of Private Life, ed. Paul Veyne, p. 297ff.; Paulinus, Life of Amb. 11
28. Jer. Against Helvidius: the Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary; Ag. Jov. 1.3, 2.36
30. Jer. Let. 48.2.14
31. Let. 69.2; Ag. Jov. 1.5 & 15
32. Ag. Jov. 1.7; Let. 48.18; Ag. Jov. 1.14-15; Let. 117.5; Let. 49.2; 'I quite recognize the kindness and forethought which have induced you to withdraw from circulation some copies of my work against Jovinian. Your diligence, however, has been of no avail, for several people coming from the city have repeatedly read aloud to me passages which they have come across in Rome.'
33. cf. M. K. Hopkins, "The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage"; Population Studies 18 (1965) p. 309 ff.
34. CJ 5.4.24 (530): "Justinian said that his ruling would do away with much dispute, but that is the only indication of doubt about these ages which survives. They became canon law. D.23.1.9" - Hopkins art. cit. p. 313
35. Oribasius (4th century), citing Rufus, Coll. Med., lib. incert. 18 (ed. J. Raeder, Leipzig, 1933, 6.2.2 pp. 107-108) Anth. Pal.. 7.568; 7.604; cf. CIL, 9.1.817 also an epitaph to a 12-year-old girl, ripe for marriage.
36. Brent D. Shaw, 'The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage: Some Reconsiderations', JRS 1987. 30-46
37. Soranus Gyn. 1.20; Plutarch, Lycurgus and Numa 4.1-3
38. In Women in Roman Law and Society, p. 156; Hopkins, art. cit. p. 325
39. Jer. Let. 127.2; cf. Jane Gardner, op. cit. p.41; D. 23.1.12
40. Though cf. Tacitus Germania, 20. that among the Germans 'virgins are not hurried' (though his own marriage to Agricola's daughter occurred when she was hardly more than 13); and Rufus' noting with approval a maxim of Hesiod advising girls to marry at 18. though saying that was too late for his own times: Oribasius, Coll. Med., lib. incert. 18
41. in A History of Private Life p. 302-3; LH 8; HM 22.1; Rousselle, op. cit. p. 188
42. "The mode is a measure of central tendency; it indicates the category which contains the largest number." Hopkins, art. cit. p. 309
43. Ibid. p. 319, deriving his data from a comparison of the inscriptional collections of A. G. Harkness, 'Age at marriage and at death in the Roman Empire', in TAPA 27 (1896) and H. Leclerq, DACL; Brent Shaw, art. cit., p. 41-2. R. Saller, 'Men's Age at Marriage and its Consequences in the Roman Family', CPh 82 (1987, 21-34.
44. See F.X. Murphy, 'A Biographical note on Melania the Elder', Traditio vol. V (1947), p.64; Gerontius, Life of St. Melania sec. 1; Palladius, LH 61 - 'Having been married seven years, at the age of twenty she renounced the world'. Life of Macrina. PG 964A.
45. Collected by Harkness (art. cit.) - who rejected them sui generis as "manifestly incorrect".
46. D 48,5,14,8
47. Jerome Let. 107.5
48. Oribasius, Coll. Med., lib. incert. 18
49. Macrobius, Sat. 7.7.6; Soranus Gyn. 1.32-3. A further scarification on perusing Roman medical advice would have been the advice to men seeking heirs that it mattered little whether their wives actually wanted intercourse or not; Soranus ruled out

the need for conscious desire in women (favoured by the Greek doctors) as an aid for conception. This lack of consent in the act could extend to its consequences: Galen talks of women who refused to admit that they were going to be wives and Soranus offered advice to midwives tending women who would not cooperate in the delivery. Gyn. 4.2

50. Jerome Let. 39.6
51. CJ 5.9.2 (381)
52. Jer. Let. 39.7
53. Life of Melania 1
54. Peter Brown in Paul Veyne, op. cit. pp. 257 & 300; Ag. Jov. 1.3; cf. also Augustine On Virg.

Abstinence for piety - virgins and widows

'Eunuchs for the love of heaven'; avowed virginity

Virginity and theory

'You know yourselves how slippery is the path of youth ... she must have the advice and encouragement of all, she must be aided by letters from you. As you know, a girl's courage is strengthened when she knows that persons in high places are interested in her.' (Jerome, Let. 7.4)

The regard in which virginity was held was equated with the standing of martyrdom in preceding centuries as the sign of a superior commitment to Christianity. For all that 'we do not disparage marriage' and 'the first natural bond of human society is that of man and his wife' nonetheless 'in the resurrection there will be no marrying nor giving in marriage'; 'the fruitfulness of the flesh is not equal to holy virginity', 'for this is a richer and more fruitful condition of blessedness, not to have a pregnant womb but to develop the soul's lofty capacities'. Virginity is a grace, but also 'a helpmate' according to Gregory of Nyssa; it is incumbent on those practising it to be still more pure as they are the vanguard of the Church. [1] Thus the difference between fleshly virginity and spiritual virginity is stressed: 'virginity is only holy because it is dedicated to God, not in itself; it is fleshly but of the spirit' Similarly John Chrysostom: 'virginity is defined not just by the one point of never having had sex: she who is careful for things of the world cannot be a virgin'; the 'evil is not in cohabitation but in impediments to the strictness of life' By that same token, 'virginity can be lost even by a thought. These are evil virgins, virgins in flesh, not in spirit'. This is to the end that virgins should be of the first rank in heaven; Demetrias is superior to her univira mother, Juliana: '[she], coming after you in

birth, has gone before you in conduct; descended from you in lineage has risen above you in honour; following you in age, has gone before you in holiness...spiritually enriched in a higher degree than yourself, since, even with this augmentation, you are inferior to her'. Augustine also recommends to bishop Quintilianus 'Galla, a widow who has undertaken holy vows, and her daughter Simplicia, who is subordinate to her mother because of her age, but superior to her because of her holiness'. Similarly Eustochium is superior to her widowed sister Blesilla: 'Your sister Blesilla is superior in age, but inferior in firmness of will'. [2] John Chrysostom sums it up: 'this group is a more honourable and princely possession than the others.' This is in a passage where the behaviour of the virgins is in direct contrast with that of the widows:

> As it is not the same thing for a maiden who is free, and for her serving woman to sin, so it is not for a virgin and a widow; because it has become a matter of indifference for widows to talk foolishly, and to revile one another, and to flatter, and to be shameless, and to appear everywhere, and to parade in the public places; but the virgin has prepared herself for greater things, and entered on the pursuit of the wisdom which is above ... while she is in this body it is her purpose to display the qualities of incorporeal powers. [3]

The Fathers thus display a greater concern for the fitness of behaviour in virgins; they have far more to lose, and their status is more precious to the Church: 'It is as if virginity were a kind of bond in humans' relationship with God' and by being modelled on the chaste relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, adoption of virginity on earth allows one to participate in the heavenly quality of 'incorruptibility'. Gregory of Nyssa argues in his treatise On Virginity:

> a virginal life should be preferred...since it is stronger than the power of death ... corruption has its origin in generation; those who cease from procreation through virginity set a limit within themselves for death ... it is appropriate to call a body "incorruptible" that has not rendered service in the life of corruptibility. [4]

These arguments are symptomatic, as are Jerome's encomiums above, of the increasing rarification of the Order of virgins within the 4th Century

Church. The Syrian Apostolic Constitutions of the 4th Century emphasizes the strictly contemplative duties expected of them:

> A virgin is not ordained, for we do not have a command from the Lord. For the advantage of virginity is not so that marriage is slandered, but in order to provide time for piety. [5]

Bearing in mind this continual linking of virginity with superior virtue and the more proper and fitting worship accorded as a property of seclusion and chastity, it is interesting then that virginity seems to be regarded as particularly the property of women in this period; despite Tertullian's statement that when the apostle says 'women' he actually means both sexes, more writers thought like Jerome (a sceptic about the capability of women for virtue); 'For this reason virginity is most abundantly poured on women, because it began with a woman'. Most treatises on virginity from this period, whether addressed to men or women, are about women's virginity (Gregory of Nyssa is the only exception), starting with Methodius' Symposium, depicting ten virgin women discussing the relative merits of marriage and virginity. The successful virgin becomes the archetype of all that the Church aspires to and by being in this set-apart, better-than-human position can acquire merit for the church on earth; more than this, becomes the living symbol of the Church on earth. This thinking ties up with the imagery of the Virgin Church that The Bridegroom, Christ, will take in chaste marriage; 'Let us kiss him whose embrace is chastity: let us have intercourse with him with whom marriage is virginity.' [6] The virgins on earth are to represent the Church's best standards for piety against apocalyptic expectations.

Yet this increasingly rarified elevation of virginity carried with it its own problems. The mystic quality of virginity, it was stressed, could be lost by a thought not just of carnality, but of the theologically unbecoming variety also; in which case it behoved the wise virgin to discriminate even amongst the fulsome praises to her own

address. When Pelagius says, via a dedication to Demetrias, to all avowed virgins,

> You have here, then, those properties on the account of which you are deservedly, and more, especially to be given preference over others; for your earthly rank and wealth are known to be derived from your relatives, not from yourself, but your spiritual riches no one can have conferred on you but yourself; for these, then, you are rightly to be praised, for those you are deservedly to be preferred to others, for they can exist only from yourself and in yourself

- this might be judged by its addressee as just an extension of the eulogisation of virginity already observed in its excesses by other writers. But on this occasion, if a virgin listens and believes, she will perish. These sentiments horrified Augustine, who hastened to write to Demetrias reminding her that her condition was through grace; while spiritual riches were the peculiar property of the dedicated virgin, they came not from herself but from God.

> Far be it from any virgin of Christ willingly to listen to statements like these. Every virgin of Christ understands the innate poverty of the human heart and...refuses to have it adorned otherwise than by the gifts of her spouse... For her possession of this great and excellent gift of chastity, she ought to give thanks to our God and Lord rather than to listen to the words of anyone who tells her that she possessed it from herself.

Apotheosized on one side, threatened with hellfire on the other, in addition to all her other preternatural qualities, the virgin would need the theological delicacy and insight of an Aquinas to thus distinguish amongst all the rhetoric so industriously poured out addressing her condition. And amongst this effluence of theology, she would have little really practical advice to her condition. Basil of Ancyra is noteworthy for being the only theologian to talk about the real problems of celibacy, by virtue of being a doctor as well as a bishop. He describes the state with accuracy and in a way addressed to female needs, teaching women that all their senses are potential media through which they may expect desire; how sight can be more seductive than touch and last longer in the memory; and he describes accurately female masturbation, the better to fight it. Such pragmatic help was rare for

virgins. [7]

Virginity and practice - the Vanguard

Abstinence gave superior standing; and without question the highest status comes from abstinence total; from vowed, lifelong virginity. But the outstanding irony of this seniority is that its incumbents were subject to the most vigorous restraints of any of the various categories; seniority here did not carry responsibility. These maidens may have been the hundred-fold, as Jerome asserts; each may have the ability to make 'a noble family yet more noble by her virginity', so much as 'to lessen the calamity of the ruin of Rome', and precede even chaste and continent relatives in heaven but their day to day existence was drastically curtailed in consequence. Large numbers of them observed their vows from home, supervised by their parents - a seeming continuance of the Roman recognition of the separate identity and authority of the family and the daughter's subjection to her pater. 'Be subject to your parents... Rarely go abroad, and if you wish to seek the company of martyrs, seek it in your own chamber.' 'Let your companions be women pale and thin with fasting, and approved by their years and conduct'; 'Be subject to your grandmother and to your mother. Never look upon a man...except in their company.' They should entirely 'avoid the company of married women who are devoted to their husbands' because of the risk of hearing unfitting talk - 'such conversations are filled with deadly venom.' [8] The ever-practical Basil of Ancyra sees the need to advise virgins in his locality particularly not to fraternize with what they might be tempted to see as a no-risk category, eunuchs: 'it is said that those who, having reached virility and the age when the genital member is capable of copulation, have cut off only their testicles, burn with greater and less restrained desire for sexual union and that not only do they feel this ardour, but they think that they can defile any woman they meet without risk.' They must be

carefully supervised by the priest, says Chrysostom, more so than any other category; for their fall will result not in divorce, but in hellfire. Therefore they must not be suffered to go abroad unnecessarily or often or talk idly or abuse or flatter; they should even be forbidden to attend funerals and vigils as these are often occasions of misbehaviour. Melania the Younger (and certainly other abbesses) further attempted to police the very minds of the virgins of her community, 'carefully scrutinizing their thoughts, not to let the smallest impure reflection live in them.' As the rewards are higher, so are the lines between right and wrong behaviour more finely drawn. The rule for virgins, whether within their parents' household or in a community with others was seclusion almost total, emerging only for worship; as little company as possible, preferably only like-minded others, family and spiritual mentors (and the last only in the company of others), and a regime of frequent prayer, learning, and some physical work, combined with fasting and deprivation. The testimonies of Jerome to the hardihood of Asella and Eustochium and Gregory of Nyssa to that of Macrina bear eloquent witness to this. [9]

As regards qualifications, unlike the widows, proof of virtue and of a godly life seems to have been taken very much on trust; since as we have examined for most of those so aspiring, the decision, as with Asella and Eustochium, would have had to be taken before puberty to be reliably in time, this was perhaps not unreasonable. Little proof of a 'godly life' would have been necessary - or forthcoming - in the case of girls vowing virginity at 10 like Asella, 'a mere babe', 'still wrapped in swaddling bands' according to Jerome - a practice that ignores Tertullian's admonition that virgins should not be accepted before puberty as symbolizing Eve's 'intelligence of her sex'. Augustine certainly believed in this guideline, as is visible in his deliberations over the future of an orphan girl left in his care: writing to

Benenatus he takes a realistic view that

> The maiden...is at present disposed to think that if she were of full age, she would refuse every proposal of marriage. She is, however, so young, that even if she were disposed to marry, she ought not yet to be either given or betrothed to anyone ... If she were disposed and prepared to marry, your proposal would not displease me; but whether she will marry anyone - although for my own part, I would much prefer that she carried out what she now talks of - I do not know, for she is at an age in which her declaration that she wishes to be a nun is to be received rather as the flippant utterance of one talking heedlessly, than as the deliberate promise of one making a solemn vow.

Interestingly, the girl's mother seems to be still around, though 'she does not make herself known', but Augustine expresses his intention of taking her wishes into consideration 'unless the maiden herself be already old enough to have legitimately a stronger claim to choose for herself' - it would be interesting to know Augustine's opinion of the age of discretion of such a maiden. He also acts seemingly on his own authority, though it lies within his province as tutor minoris, in bluntly refusing to entertain the suit of one Rusticus, a pagan; an interesting reflection on his opinion of 'mixed' marriages, given his own upbringing. But in the importance attached to each believer's capacity to make their own decision in the mortally important sphere of sexual abnegation is evident a greater measure of equality of judgement for women, from which their greater influence inside marriage comes. Ambrose, on the other hand, accepted the dedication of girls by their parents at birth in his order of virgins at Milan; they then took their vows at puberty in a public ceremony, after which they would live with their parents, but under the control of the Bishop. Melania the Younger had similarly dedicated her short-lived daughter at birth. By this route some element of choice, along with a nod to Tertullian's school of thought, was at least theoretically preserved, but resistance to these lifelong expectations must have been equally as hard as those girls found who wished for virginity but were pressured into marriage. Certainly, once on the path, with so restricted a programme there should

have been few outlets for regrets or opportunity for impure behaviour. [10]

As regards actual duties, the rules of this period are still embryonic beyond a general emphasis on regular routines of prayer, study, hard work and self-denial. For those who took to the life on a wholly serious basis the important factor was the isolation and the time; their duties were not those of the average women of the community or the Church: 'the advantage of virginity is not so that marriage is slandered but in order to provide time for piety'. There was evidently a great emphasis in the sources on the place of self-denial and austerity as a necessary pre-condition for the right attitude of mind for this contemplative ideal. In this, many followed the wisdom of experience garnered by the Desert monastics: 'When one wants to take a town, one cuts off the supply of water and food. The same applies to the passions of the flesh. If a man lives a life of fasting and hunger, the enemies of his soul are weakened.' But in the kind of extreme lifestyle practised by such devotees as Asella, it behoved the virgin to excercise some native caution; we find even Jerome warning - in milder old age - 'I do not, however, lay on you as an obligation any extreme fasting or abnormal abstinence from food. Such practices soon break down weak constitutions and cause bodily sickness before they lay the foundations of a holy life.' Indeed 'I am myself acquainted with anchorites of both sexes who by excessive fasting have so impaired their faculties that they do not know what to do or where to turn, when to speak and when to be silent.' [11] Actual regulations for observance were not as yet precisely detailed, and owed more to personal inclination and situation than is the case a century or two hence. Asella, for instance, as an example of the virgin enclosed in her own home, followed a regimen of fasting 'for two or three days at a time' all the year round and 'from week's end to week's end' in Lent, taking

only 'bread and salt and cold water' when she did eat; combining this with mean clothes and harsh living conditions, visits to martyria, long prayer, till her knees were 'hardened like a camel', and strict isolation, rarely seeing even her sister Marcella, 'much as she loved her': and thus 'found for herself a monkish hermitage in the centre of busy Rome'. [12]

Another factor in deciding the lifestyle of many of these candidates for virginity was the proximity and advice of well-meaning relatives. Laeta's daughter Paula, being trained in the virgin's life by her family according to advice from Jerome, was to be enclosed even more straitly than Asella, barely to go abroad at all - 'let her never visit a church or martyrium unless with her mother' - nor even to congregate with her family: 'let her not take her food with others, that is, at her parents' table' to avoid the dual temptations of company and 'dishes she may long for'. She is also to forgo cultural improvement and the pastimes of leisure in favour of a practice of manual labour and study of the scriptures. For Demetrias, of whose actual practices we know little, again Jerome is profuse with advice as to conduct, and again this is proffered more for the information and assistance of the female relatives who will be expected to safeguard her: a regime of regular prayer, allotted times for study and manual work, overt poverty, self-denial and isolation from company. Eunomia (living with her parents Avita and Apronianus) was trained by her mother while still 'a little girl' and also 'schooled by the guiding voice of Melania' - the Elder, her over-powering cousin. [13]

Eustochium's lifestyle - if not her decision - was similarly imposed on her by those who knew the virgin's business better than she did herself: for all Jerome's extensive advice to her, implying that hers were the decisions over her conduct, more revealing is his account that from the age of ten until Paula's death, Eustochium 'always kept

close to her mother's side, obeyed all her commands, never slept apart from her, never walked abroad or took a meal without her, never had a penny that she could call her own, rejoiced when her mother gave to the poor her little patrimony'. Macrina's is superficially a similar story: she provides herself with a safety net when 'as a safeguard she resolved not to be separated from her mother even for a moment'; but in her case, there is a very different atmosphere to this, since Macrina at all times is represented by her brother and biographer as being very much responsible for her own decisions, and to a certain extent imposing them on her mother Emmelia - who makes the potentially ironic comment that 'she carried the rest of her children in her womb for a definite time, but Macrina she bore always since in a sense she carried her about'. Further, while Eustochium appears during Paula's lifetime as only a vague, shadowy appendage to her extremely active mother, Macrina occupies a much more central and positive role: 'she helped her mother to bear her burden of responsibilities, for she had four sons and three daughters and paid taxes to three different governors, since her property was scattered in as many districts... In all these matters she shared her mother's toils...also by her own life she instructed her mother greatly, leading her to that same mark of philosophy'. She 'persuaded her mother to give up her ordinary life...and bring her point of view down to that of the masses and share the life of the maids'. Further when her own favourite brother, Naucratius, died prematurely, Macrina in Gregory's account is considerably more in evidence and influence than is Eustochium during Paula's grief over Blesilla - Macrina plays more the role of a Jerome, in fact, for

> facing the calamity in a rational spirit, she both preserved herself from collapse, and becoming the support of her mother's weakness, raised her from the depths of grief, and by her own steadfastness and imperturbability taught her mother's soul to be brave. In consequence, her mother was not overwhelmed by the affliction, nor did she behave in any ignoble or womanish way, so as to cry out at the disaster, or tear her dress, or lament over the trouble, or strike up funeral chants with mournful melodies.

The contradiction implicit in his statement that Emmelia was persuaded out of her womanish inclinations by a woman offering herself as a model does not seemingly strike Gregory. [14]

The freedom of the virgin from sexuality was held to imply their extra availability to God, and at secondhand, to their church. A primary expectation of such successfully practising virgins, is of their functioning as a kind of natural resource to be channeled into their community to in some sort improve their environs, by lending sanctity to those around them. Moreover, the families concerned, who are frequently portrayed as crucial to the success of the candidate for virginity, are an integral link in this process, by which they are seen as benefiting. Besides being worked out in conjunction with the sometimes reluctant families, the observances of the virgin reputedly engendered in the girls concerned the much-advertised ability to 'ennoble' their mostly noble families still further, besides the benefit accruing to their own souls and their community. Demetrias' mother and grandmother, of a family 'second to none in Rome' should have 'congratulated each other that now a virgin was to make a noble house more noble still by her virginity. She had found, they said, a way to benefit her family and to lessen the calamity of the fall of Rome.' Augustine, indeed, advised them to consider 'how incomparably greater is the glory and advantage gained by your family in giving to Christ women consecrated to his service, than in giving to the world men called to the honours of the consulship'; Demetrias 'has acted the more magnanimous part in choosing to bring a blessing on that noble family by forbearing from marriage than to increase the number of its descendants.' Nor is it merely an impersonal augmentation of family lustre; a personal elevation may be enjoyed by the mother of such a resource: 'in [her] also that which could not be in your own person begins to be yours. For she did not contract a marriage on earth that she might, not only for herself, but

also for you, be spiritually enriched to a higher degree than yourself'. [15]

This process of invoking beneficence might not always be a joyful or welcome experience for the family so benefitted. Though it is held to be the addition of lustre to a family, Eustochium's power in this respect is written of in singularly vengeful and combative terms. She 'by resolving to be a virgin had breached the gates of nobility and broken down the pride of a consular house. The first of Roman ladies, she has brought under the yoke the first of Roman families.' Paula the Younger's ability in this respect is similarly ambiguous in import: she has the power to add sanctity, the one thing lacking to the venerable and distinguished consular Albinus, 'the one unbeliever' in her family - and she has a duty to impose this. 'When she sees her grandfather, she must lean on his breast and whether he likes it or not, sing Alleluia in his ears'; proving that she, 'through the virtues of her grandmother and aunt is nobler in holiness than she is in lineage'. The virgin in action should be not just a prop to an already believing family; she must be prepared to do battle even in her withdrawn circumstance. Paula the Younger's postulated ability in this respect was practised in fact by Macrina, who is given the credit for the conversions of her brothers Basil and Peter. Basil, already a noted rhetor and heading for power as a local potentate she 'drew towards the mark of philosophy with such speed that he forsook the glories of this world'; Peter, the youngest she 'took...soon after birth from the nurse's breast and reared him herself and educated him on a lofty system of training' becoming all things to him, 'father, teacher, tutor, mother, giver of all good advice.' [16]

Other virgins, if not the chief instrument of the family tendency to piety, still acted as support groups to relatives in the same line of work. Augustine's sister, if we knew for certain of her history might be a case in point, capably conducting his convent at Hippo, which fell into disorder only after her demise; and he wrote to a consecrated virgin Sapida who evidently lived with her brother Timotheus, a deacon of the church of Carthage, tending to his need. On the occasion of the death of her brother, Augustine accepted from her (against his own rule in the matter of gifts) a tunic which she had prepared for her brother shortly before his death. [17]

Nor were their families the only beneficiaries of the mission of the virgins to sanctify their environs. Though understandably more curtailed in external activities than the devout matrons and widows of their time, they were called sometimes to exert more power than could be expressed in contemplation. Largesse to the locale, for instance: Demetrias was persuaded by Pope Leo to build a church dedicated to St. Stephen on her Via Latina estate. Macrina was active in the setting up of the family convent at Annesi; companioned by her mother, the double house co-headed by her brother, the initiative nevertheless seems to have been firmly Macrina's, and the rest followed her lead. Service to humbler communities of a more useful kind was also in evidence. That a household virgin need not always observe solitude so scrupulously and rigorously as to preclude serving her community, even if not so materially endowed as Demetrias or Macrina, is shown by Piamoun, 'a virgin who lived the years of her life with her mother, eating every other day in the evening and spinning flax.' Even more usefully, 'she was accounted worthy of the gift of prophecy', which she bent to the use of her locale - a handy advantage in a village threatened by Nile floodings and neighbouring villagers made hostile by the competition for distribution of the water. Nor was this all that was required of her:

when she warned the elders of her village of an imminent attack by a neighbouring village (having received her intelligence through an angelic envoy), 'the elders were afraid and fell at her feet, beseeching her and saying to her: "We dare not meet them, for we know their drunkenness and madness. But if you have pity on the whole village and your own house, go out yourself and meet them."' She would not agree to this, whether because this would more seriously encroach on her seclusion is not stated; instead, she bends her formidable piety to a more signal display of the greatness of God and prays that the marauders' feet be nailed to the spot. Sure enough, 'about the first hour, when they were about three miles away, they were nailed to the ground and could not move. And it was revealed to them also that their hindrance had come about through her petitions, and they sent to the village and asked for peace, saying "Give thanks to God and the prayers of Piamoun, for they hindered us."' [18]

Virginity and practice - weaker vessels

That many women fulfilled the blueprint for piety outlined by the Fathers beyond their expectations is evident in the witnesses of such as Eustochium, Asella, Macrina, and the many virtuous virgins found in Palladius and the Desert Fathers; that many women similarly found it extremely hard to live up to or live with the increasing rarification of the lifestyle is equally evident. In this context Palladius' description of the difficulties of the Tabennesiot nuns in the Thebaid in their attempts towards it is illuminating. So rigid was their guardianship of their purity of mind as of body that one of their number was driven to suicide by the rumours of impropriety against her, solely as the result of having encountered a man who accidentally landed on their enclosed side of the river; but the originator of the stories against her was judged equally harshly for lacking in charity and ultimately also made away with herself. The Desert Fathers were

familiar with this problem; from their experience they concluded that denunciation was of no help to the denounced and of great harm to the denunciator. Many such as Ammonas and John the Dwarf were noted for rebuking those informing on their brethren. By this reluctance to accuse, amongst other examples we can find a case directly analogous to that of the Tabennesiot nuns - of a monk denouncing two brothers for being lovers - nipped in the bud before reaching such a damaging conclusion. The anonymous 'old man' to whom the brother made his report, evidently familiar with the idea of the projection of guilty desires on to others, ordered the accuser to be isolated 'for he himself has the passion he attaches to them'. The nuns at Hippo evidently had the same problem: but either Augustine was not familiar with this thinking, or he did not consider it safe advice for women. Addressing the same issue, he advises them that whoever notices immodesty in a sister should first personally warn her that this has been observed, to give her a chance to check herself, and only if she persists, 'whoever may have had the opportunity of seeing this must now report her as one who has been injured and needs healing', in which case he stresses, 'do not think that in informing upon one another like this you are guilty of malice; for it is rather the case that you are guilty if you allow your sisters to fall by keeping silent when you could correct them by giving information as to their faults'. If the sister concerned denies the charge, however, she cannot be disciplined for it until other witnesses to the offence have been secured, 'so that before the whole sisterhood she may not be accused by one witness but convicted by two or three' - which, if observed, would provide against exactly the scenario reported of the Tabennesiot nuns. [19]

This advice was given in the context of problems at the convent at Hippo necessitating several sharp letters from Augustine, following the death of his sister, who seems to have maintained it with admirable

stability. Professing dissatisfaction with her successor, however, after several years of her rule, the nuns 'riotously demanded her replacement' and agitated for 'concessions involving...some most dangerous precedents, subversive of sound discipline'. The dissatisfaction seems rather to have come coincidentally with the arrival of a new prior, with whom, however, they assert themselves to be well content - perhaps their dissatisfaction was increased by finding him in fact more sympathetic than their prioress. Even so, Augustine refuses to put in a personal appearance at their request, observing sapiently that 'perhaps your rising against authority would have been even more violent in my presence' and stating that he would in any case have felt compelled to refuse what they demanded in such an unfitting fashion; and warned that had he been faced with such a tumult in person, he would have had to take a more severely punitive stance. In sum, he has no intention of removing the prioress, and they should reconsider their duty and learn not to quarrel. Similar was the experience of Elias who built a great monastery for some 300 virgins of different walks of life at Athribe, only to find himself having to live with them - to the detriment of his own spiritual well-being - to keep the peace because they 'continually had fights'. [20]

Some nuns, however, were misled by these very clerics on whom they so depended: Sabinianus the subdeacon was castigated by Jerome for creeping into a virgin's cell in the latter's Bethlehem convent (ironically enough, given Jerome's especial preoccupation with foolish virgins who encouraged bogus spiritual advisors) 'to seduce the virgin to whom it belongs' after promising to marry 'your unfortunate victim' and who was reputed to have served 'many virgins' in the same fashion. Another example we have in detail is another virgin whose life was imposed on her by family pressure, and whose dramatic difficulties came after more than 20 years of an exemplary life-style. Maria 'the

Harlot', the niece of the hermit Abraham, fell into her harlotry when she failed to maintain the standards he had set up for her. She did not have the 'glory' of beggaring herself, like Paula or the Melanias, nor even the virtue of a choice; when her father, Abraham's brother, died when she was seven, and 'left her untold riches', Abraham took this decision for her: 'so that her mind might not be entangled in the affairs of this world ... at once the servant of Christ ordered it all to be given away to the needy and the orphans'. He then built her a cell adjoining his, and simply incorporated the small girl into his own lifestyle. 'He taught her the Psalter and other Scriptures; she kept vigil there with him, singing the praises of the Lord; she sang psalms without number and strove to emulate her uncle in all his ascetic practices... It was her uncle's daily prayer that she might be kept safe from the snares of the Devil and the traps of wicked thoughts. So she held constantly to the rules he taught her.' Then after twenty years of 'living like an unspotted lamb or untouched dove', she succumbed to the blandishments of a visiting monk of somewhat less than Abraham's perfection of life, and was seduced by him. Unsurprisingly, after her upbringing, she assumed herself to be destined for damnation; in an environment where the coveting of an extra vegetable or the addition of water to one's bread and salt was regarded as a betrayal of the way of life, with such a 'pollution' on her conscience, Maria despaired completely: 'I feel as if I am dead already; I have lost all that I had before by the hard work of asceticism; all my prayers, tears and vigils have come to nothing. I have angered God and destroyed myself ... how can I, a sinner, covered with filth, ever speak again to my uncle? If I were to dare to do so, fire would come out of that window and consume me.' Feeling thus completely unable to confess to her uncle and his colleagues (including Ephraim, who wrote the story), she 'fled away to another city, changed her appearance and began to ply her trade in a brothel'. Abraham took three days to notice her disappearance and then

two years to actually set enquiries in train, according to the Life; however, he did ultimately ascertain her whereabouts, and then, in a quite unusually improbable story even by the standards of the medium, disguised himself as a soldier, went in search of her, hid from her his identity throughout an evening's roistering in her company ('Forty years of abstinence when he tasted nothing but bread,' marvels Ephraim, 'and now without hesitation he chewed meat to save a soul from hell! The choir of holy angels rejoiced and was amazed at his discretion, for without hesitation he ate and drank in order that he might draw a soul out of the mire!') and retired with her to the inner chamber. ('What' enquires Ephraim doubtfully 'shall I say of you, athlete of Christ? Shall I speak of continence or incontinence, wisdom or foolishness, discretion or indiscretion? After forty years of conversion, you lie down on a prostitute's bed and wait for her to come to you! All this' he concludes firmly 'you did for the praise and glory of Christ'.) After this the story follows the pattern common to tales of harlots who turned to penitence: he reveals himself and exhorts her; she is overcome with grief and guilt and pleads for a chance to repent; leaves for the desert with him, and performs her penance with such extremes of grief and asceticism that after three years she is granted the power of healing as a visible sign of the acceptability of her penitence by a merciful God. [21]

Virgins under obedience nursing sick clerics were equally at risk from them. Many virgins playing Martha fell victim to patients overcome by their first contact with a woman in many years. One such, a bishop so ill that 'all had given him up as lost' was still overcome by lust at a visiting nun merely touching his foot. He obtained her services as a nurse, since all thought him at death's door, ate a revivifying meal she had cooked, and propositioned her: 'lie down with me and conceive sin'. A severely ill 'old man' from Scetis who went to convalesce in the

nearby town, not wishing to burden his brethren with his care, fell into the same trap of assuming 'my body is dead' and discovering otherwise when allocated 'a devout virgin' to tend him. Both virgins subsequently became pregnant and both clerics had to assume the responsibility - these kind of incidents lending credence to the many false accusations of clerics impregnating virgins. Another virgin came to temptation when she got into the habit of ordering items from a coenobite working as a linen-maker to feed the poor: she ended up living with him for six months before he was overcome by guilt and fled. [22]

Other virgins were potentially more seriously lured away, not just from bodily purity , but from the sanction of the Church: one Primus, mentioned by Augustine, entered into 'intercourse unsanctioned by the church' with the nuns at Spana, and when disciplined by the Church, in pique went off to join the Donatists, taking two nuns with him. Augustine wrote a sympathetic but warning letter to Felicia, the virgin concerned in what seems to have been another such case, admonishing her against 'disturbances' of her mind because of 'bad shepherds'. She also seems to have been drawn towards the Donatists by such bad priests, since she is advised to 'love with all your heart Him and His Church who did not permit you, by joining yourself with the lost, to lose the reward of your virginity or to perish with them. For if you should depart from this world separated from the unity of the body of Christ, it will avail you nothing to have preserved inviolate your virginity'. She should rather give 'sincerest affection to those good servants of his through whose agency you were compelled to come in [to the feast]'; but how an isolated and confused virgin was to ensure that it was the good shepherds rather than the bad who were influencing her in the case of two strong but contradictory compulsions was not enlarged upon. [23]

The desert authors are illuminating also for unhappy little stories of lone ascetics who endured obloquy, either by their fellows who misunderstood their actions, or because they genuinely fell into error. Palladius tells of the immensely ascetic virgin who fell after 6 years of enclosure in a cell wearing sackcloth and 'taking no pleasure'; in the end she sinned with the man who waited on her. Palladius attributes this to her spiritual pride; she practised ascesis, he says austerely, for human ostentation and vainglory and thus her guardian left her. Six years of abstinence, it would seem, gave her no acquired virtue; the judgement still awaited the ultimate outcome of her struggle. Many must similarly have tired after a firm initial purpose and received as little credit for abnegation already achieved; a daunting thought to face, if some years into an ascetic vocation with courage flagging. It was particularly discouraging if even resistance of temptation might gain one no credit in the eyes of male ascetics. Hilarion the hermit, having achieved the cure of a virgin driven to madness by possession, 'reproved the girl when her health returned, for having, by her imprudent conduct, permitted the devil to gain control of her'. The interesting aspect of this case, particularly given that the author is Jerome, is that absolutely no instances of her alleged 'imprudence', such as would give the case a clearer moral, are given; on the contrary, we are told that the possession was caused by the spells of a youth enamoured of the virgin who had repeatedly made advances to her which she had steadfastly resisted. But the virgin, like Caesar's wife, must be above the very suspicion of reproach and by attracting misfortunes she is rebuked as the author of them. It was a fine-drawn line, however, and exactly how fine tended to depend on which cleric was encountered: Serapion, by contrast, found a virgin blameworthy in her life for being too careful. A household virgin in Rome who had made a virtue out of not appearing in public for 25 years, she broke this rule when Serapion pointed out to her that if she were truly dead to the world 'it is all the same to you

whether you appear or not. So appear in public', but balked at a command to walk through the city naked, on the same rationale - thus being open to his criticism that the motives for her stringent seclusion were not religious but prideful. [24]

Some took steps to make the daunting path easier to follow. The virgin who sinned with her 'attendant' may well have been one of a breed that aroused much contention and ire in the more severe Fathers; those who set up a virginal lifestyle but in conjunction with a member of the opposite sex in almost a partnership. Known as Virgines subintroductae or agapetae, these are accredited by Hans Achelis with 'the earnest desire to keep [the vow of continency]' - but were all too frequently not so accredited in their own time. The situation was understandably open to suspicion; 'the cohabitation of the sexes under the condition of strict continence, a couple sharing the same house, often the same room, and sometimes the same bed, yet conducting themselves as brother and sister.' [25] The advantages of such a system, if sincerely practised, are evident: lone women shrinking from the rigours of fending for themselves could have, as well as a companion, an agent to carry out their business, thereby also avoiding the need for the going abroad so frequently complained of in virgins; frequently one of the pair would be better off and thus provide for the less fortunate partner, acquiring merit and incidentally making life easier for a fellow Christian; they could assist each other in material ways, inspire each other by example and avoid the pitfalls open to those who, isolated in their struggle, became tired or deceived or lonely. This system must have proved vastly more attractive to many than more orthodox methods of asceticism. Mentions of this practice are frequent in our period: in the three Cappadocian Fathers, in Jerome, in the canons of various church councils banning the practice, including the famous Council of Nicaea in 325, in John Chrysostom's two Homilies against it; even the Desert Fathers have

sayings citing cases of 'old men' needing to prove their purity because they were 'served by a holy virgin'. [26]

The suspicions to which these partnerships laid themselves open are obvious; Chrysostom, though conceding that many of them were sincere in their beliefs and had retained their bodily purity, nonetheless was convinced that only sexual desire, however unacknowledged, could so permanently bind a man to a woman, for 'why else would a man put up with the faults of a woman? He would find her despicable'. Jerome cavalierly dismisses the practical pleas of necessity: 'How many virgins and widows there are who have looked after their property for themselves without thereby incurring any scandal'; 'gleefully noted the frequency with which the supposed virgins were betrayed by their "swelling wombs"', and pointed out the thinness of some of the excuses proferred for close cohabitation, in a letter to a monk criticised of this (who happened, in addition, to be a critic of his Against Jovinian): 'I should like everyone to take a wife who, because they might get frightened in the night, cannot manage to sleep alone.' A further irritation to Chrysostom, it seems, was the claim of many of these couples that their arrangement gave them tougher moral fibre to withstand temptation; a contradiction to Chrysostom, since in his eyes they were living in a constant state of temptation and opportunity for thoughts of lust which, as we have showed, were as fatal as the deed to those embarked on the ascetic lifestyle. But in any case, even if he had been willing to accept this plea, Chrysostom advances against them the argument of Paul (Romans 14; I Cor. 8) that those capable of strength must help those less capable; these couples are providing the occasion for sin in others by giving rise to unchristian suspicion and offence, therefore, if truly strong, they should be willing to suffer for God by giving up that which only arguably profits them and which definitely leads others astray. In addition to the harm to other

Christians is added the harm of the church through the ill-repute attached to it by these irregular couples. [27]

These concerns are again aired by Jerome, in what is, after the vituperation we have noted on the subject when writing to Eustochium, a surprisingly mild letter to an actual case in point, his Letter 117 to a mother and daughter living in Gaul. These women were living apart, both of them with 'clerical directors'; the implication in their case is that they found each other hard to live with and in any case, preferred their independence, since they seemed to be supporting the men. Jerome was not actually acquainted with these women, but had been asked to write to them by the brother of the daughter, who was worried by the scandal attendant upon the situation. In his letter, Jerome takes the stance that while he suspects nothing evil, it is incumbent upon them to prevent suspicion in others. 'Even if your own consciences acquit you of misdoing, yet the very rumour of such will bring disgrace upon you' and he takes the same view as Chrysostom, that this is in any case an unnecessarily risky lifestyle, placing them gratuitously in the way of temptation: 'why must you live in a house where you must daily struggle for life and death?' And as much as Chrysostom he doubts the validity of the justifications: 'If you are a true virgin, why do you fear your mother's careful guardianship; and if you have fallen, why do you not openly marry?' At least she should 'live in a separate building and take your meals apart; for if you remain under one roof with him, slanderers will say that you share with him your bed'. They equally incur censure; the mother for letting her daughter leave in this way, the daughter for displaying unseemly lack of familial feeling, both women for their live-in clerics, and the brother for not showing more decision in rebuking the women. [28]

This case demonstrates a further aspect to the subintroductae, and one hardly likely to endear them to the Fathers; that this system seems to have been a means whereby Christian women again liberated themselves from family restrictions and preoccupations, but with more than a suggestion that it was for their own ends rather than to free their minds for praising God. Chrysostom is also worried by the frivolity shown by many, and that, worse, they are leading their 'monks' into similar levity of mind: they spend their days running errands for their companions, he worries, 'calling at shops to see if madame's mirror was ready yet, if her bowl had been repaired' and by spending long hours with womanly converse the monk might acquire the habits and 'servile mentality' of that sex. In short, Chrysostom worries about what he perceives as a process of what we should call "role reversal", and says that the distinctive male and female characteristics are being overturned in these invidious companionships; besides the men becoming frivolous and effete, the women are adopting lordly ways and rejoicing in dominion over men, forgetting that "the head of woman is man" (I Cor. 11:3). Elizabeth Clark attributes this attitude to an inability in the ancient world to comprehend the concept of Platonic friendship between the sexes, since 'friendship in the truest sense meant a kind of parity between two people, and women by virtue of their inferior nature and status, could thus rarely qualify as suitable candidates for friendship with men'. [29]

This has a familiar ring to it. Inferior by status again, and subject by sin as we have seen, amongst women of less mettle - and less means - than a Eustochium or a Melania the appearance of this phenomenon of the virgines subintroductae ranks amongst attempts to wean themselves from their subjection equally to their families and in the eyes of the church; in many cases evidently sincerely motivated though potentially unfortunate in result. Probably amongst many of those who fell, as did

Palladius' virgin examined above, we might find a real vocation not equalled by spiritual strength. And once again we encounter the appeal to nature and the scriptures in the preoccupation of the critics of this lifestyle with the fitness to assigned roles for women. But, as we have seen, the nature of 'roles' of this kind accords ill with the standards postulated for the virgins proper, the élite of the church in the theory of the theologians - a theory against which we have seen some small but illuminating vignettes.

This contradiction is always present in the theoretical writing of the period; the women inherently sinful of nature who may yet be capable of dazzling probity such as to put in their hands some of the burden for the spiritual well-being of the church and demonstrate their fitness for the legacy passed on by the Mother of God, and such as to give them a powerful hold on the apocalyptic imagery of the Early Church. The need to confront this confusion rarely seems to disturb the writers of improving homilies addressed to the women involved, but many women were unable to resolve the conflict, or, as we have seen, found means unacceptable within the hardening boundaries of orthodoxy. But some found room to manoeuvre within the contradictions of the Patristic conceptions of womanly virtue so successfully as to achieve exaggerated admiration from these arbiters.

'The continence which is aware of its own right'; the order of Widows

'Is widowhood grievous to you? why should it be grievous at all, to one who is soon to pass away? The appointed day is at hand, the pain will not last long.' (Gregory Nazianzen, Or. 18.43)

Widowhood and theory

Widows seem to have represented a numerically more superior and historically more ancient tendency in the church; however, ultimately they would lack the qualities that put the virgins in the front rank in the contest for the Crown of Crowns. The widows are attested from the earliest apostolic times in their own category, 'the roll of widows', along with instructions as to their qualifications and supervision; and they seem to have quickly occupied an uneasy middle ground between being church functionaries and prime recipients of church charity, but were always viewed in the light of a separate category. [31]

Historically, in Roman society the widow occupied an equally nebulous ground: while the univira, the widow faithful to her single dead husband, was traditionally held up as a model to be admired as having attained some ideal of marriage, and the administration of the civic cults of Fortuna Muliebris and Pudicitia were reserved for these women of superior standing in the community, there are also some indications that this was not universally the case. Such a position could also be exploited as an opportunity to gain independence and self-determination, and might be seen less charitably by the families as an irresponsible attitude to the obligations of blood and property - an attitude which finds echoes in the families of the devout women of the later period. And indeed, some of the widows of this study were to that extent being opportunistic in refusing to marry again for their own reasons, as did Marcella and Melania the Elder; but were also adopting and adapting the principle of the univira by giving it an additional mystical resonance. For, with belief in resurrection came the consideration of genuine confusion as to one's position on the last day as the spouse of more than one partner, a position Macrina can exploit even as only a betrothed spouse. The choice of her marriage having been made for her by her parents when she was too young to have seriously objected, when the plans for her future were perforce deferred because

of the death of her betrothed she can quite sincerely express doubts as to her status as belonging to him in the eyes of God, and assume a title of univira that is purely mystical in quality.

Whatever the position of such a special case, though, in society at large the impulse of the Christian Church was towards institutionalizing the concept of loyalty after death to the single marriage, for men and women, with a heavy moral disincentive towards remarriage; a by-product of which was the provision of a supply of mature church members with time, energy and experience of something of the world to channel into the service of the church. 'A widow who is "loosed from the law of her husband" has, for her one duty, to continue a widow.' This being so, the way of the women of the 60-fold, of modified - or belated - abnegation, by contrast with the straitened path of virginity would seem comparatively light. Widowhood was more of a moveable feast, could be embarked on by women in a kind of semi-official capacity without major upset in one's own home, by simply preserving the status quo after the death of the husband - with the advantage of retaining the kind of independence that leads the church writers to complain so bitterly of the wilful demeanour of some widows. Ageruchia is enjoined by Jerome to follow the example of her mother Benigna, a widow for 14 years, and her grandmother Metronia, a widow for 40 years: 'a noble band of tried Christian women' of whom there is no suggestion that they altered by much their noble lifestyle in Gaul. Similar praise is meted out to Juliana and Proba, mother and grandmother of Demetrias, women of notably independent and autocratic turns of mind who retained firm control over their own destinies. [32]

The issue with vows of widowhood was concomitantly more blurred than with vowed virginity. The instant one took vows as a virgin, one became a case for concern to one's guardians and local churches. With widows the case was rather the opposite since Paul warned carefully

about assuming too many widows at the care of the Church, and they were actively encouraged, where the family circumstances allowed, to merely contain chastely under their own auspices 'that the church may not be charged, but may be free to relieve those that are widows indeed'. 'Widows indeed' are deemed by Paul to be over three-score years old, the wife of only one husband and seen to be upright in the community; and 'such as are desolate and have no relations to help them, who cannot labour with their hands, who are weakened by poverty and overcome by years, whose trust is in God, and their only work prayer'. [33] Thus the dichotomy in the status of widows; by these criteria few indeed qualify, and yet it does not behove young widows such as Ageruchia and Salvina to marry again merely because they are not old and poor; they can be still better witnesses, of whom it will be said 'her youth makes her chastity all the more commendable'. They are advised: 'Do not be disturbed because the apostle allows none to be chosen as a widow under the age of three-score years old, neither suppose that he intends to reject those who are still young. Believe that you are indeed chosen by him who said to his disciple "Let no man despise your youth"'. So they remain widows within the community, not on the Church roll, with less incumbent on them than the virgins. [34]

Thus also the wide disparity between the intensity of their observances. Although not an office properly speaking, the widowed state implied - to those inclined to heed the words of the Fathers - a demand for perfection and a mission to the younger women in the community. Certainly some, such as Melania, Marcella, Paula, Blesilla regarded the station as a commandment to greater devotional and ascetic efforts; for less extreme cases such as Furia, Salvina, Ageruchia, Juliana, Proba and the unnamed widow to whom the Letter to a Young Widow is addressed, Jerome, Augustine and Chrysostom restrict their advice to the meat of the matter. These women should read Paul for guidance

(Jerome can also be found advocating Dido as an example to Christian widows), preserve their modest demeanour and their chastity - and above all, their reputation for chastity; 'a woman's reputation is a tender plant...especially if she has no husband' and no opportunity for scandal should be given to unbelievers or the community because of 'too great intimacy' with 'troops of retainers'. Thus Paula 'from the time of the death of her husband, never sat at meat with a man, however holy'. [35]

Several levels of thinking about widows existed, and in some cases rather a strained attitude. Some merited no admiration for their continence, for they were 'widows from compulsion, not choice'. Others choose the state for undesirable reasons; they 'prefer widowhood to rule by a husband'. This, as we will see, was an incentive offered not infrequently by the patristic writers themselves to persuade their targets of the advantages of the situation; but was not regarded as a becoming conclusion for the women themselves to arrive at, and the Fathers complained bitterly of their taking advantage of their situation. 'It has become a matter of indifference for widows to talk foolishly, and revile one another, and flatter, and be shameless, and appear everywhere and parade in public places' and some 'treat priests pridefully because they are rich' - or, presumably, because of the more independent habits learned within the greater freedom of marriage. If re-attached to a man, these unruly women would be at least notionally under authority; nonetheless, raising one's widowhood to the level of an avowed life-choice approved by the church was to the ascetic fathers of necessity to be advocated to women for whom virginity is no longer an option. 'A widow should be ignorant that second marriage is permitted; she should know nothing of the apostle's words "it is better to marry than to burn"' but is invited instead to consider that 'digamy is preferable only to fornication'. Given the comprehensive expectations of marriage and the early notions of the marriageable age we have

examined, this advice would apply to a far greater proportion of the women to whom the fathers preached. But those so addressed were widely believed to be in more need of exhortation: 'Widows who are placed in a position of distress and tribulation' were represented as having a harsher lot to endure. [36]

They were believed to be rather worse off in terms of susceptibility of the flesh, for instance: Jerome's advice to Eustochium compares her task with that of her sister Blesilla, who married but whose husband died after only seven months of marriage and so 'lost thereby the crown of virginity and the pleasures of wedlock' and of whom Jerome seems not to hold out high hopes: 'it will be harder for her than for you to forgo delights once known and with a lesser reward for preserving her continence'. Augustine when expostulating on the duty to widowhood seemingly suppresses his own experience to insist 'it is easier to bridle than fulfil desire' - but adds sourly that 'I have, however, often observed this fact of human behaviour that, with certain people, when sexuality is repressed avarice seems to grow in its place'. [37]

Other objections to continence raised were more down-to-earth: 'My little patrimony is shrinking day by day, the property I inherited is being squandered, my servant insults me, my maid ignores my orders. Who will appear on my behalf before the authorities? Who will see to the education of my children and the training of my slaves?' Excuses, says Jerome: 'No woman marries to avoid cohabiting with a husband.' John Chrysostom, from the experiences of his mother, has and vividly represents in On the Priesthood, a clear understanding of 'the horrors of widowhood' at that time, even amongst those who had adequate means to support their state; 'she must encounter the slothfulness of domestics, and keep an eye on their misdeeds, ward off the plots of relatives, and bravely bear the insults of those who levy the public taxes, and their

cruelty in the imposition of tribute'. Being a widow with children tends to added anxieties on their behalf, not to mention the expense. Nonetheless, he, along with many of the Fathers, took a direr view of the sufferings involved in marriage; the clashes of temperaments, the petty wrongs and jealousies between husband and wife, the pain, worry and expense of children. Addressing those relieved of them in On Not Marrying Again, he stated his belief that they were looking at their marriages, now safely in the past, through rose-coloured spectacles, and labours the advantages of remaining a widow. [38]

Those lower down the social scale were rather prone to the kind of petty, diminishing anxieties and grievances suffered by other widows Chrysostom talks about, who were alone, impoverished and embittered. Less rancourous than Jerome, Chrysostom, if frequency of iteration is any indicator, seems also to have had bad experiences with the Order; but he is fully awake to the trials which must have driven many women to throw themselves on the charity of the Church, women whom Jerome castigates as 'widows from compulsion, not choice'. Chrysostom is particularly interesting in his advice to priests on the care necessary in the vetting of the widows' roll; some may try to get on it who 'have destroyed houses, spoiled marriages, and often been caught in thefts and frauds' and 'that such should be supported by the funds of the church, brings vengeance from God and utter condemnation from men'. For the situations of those of humbler origins who joined the order, he is an illuminating witness; though taking their woes into account his criticisms are stringent. 'Widows as a class, owing partly to poverty, partly to age and sex, use an unbridled freedom of speech...and cry out unseasonably and find unnecessary fault, and murmur over what they ought to be thankful for and complain about what ought to be approved of' such that great forbearance is necessary not to be 'provoked by their unseasonable annoyances, nor by their unreasonable repinings' since

'they are forced to beg through fear of want, and become insolent through begging, and through insolence are again despised'. [39]

It is interesting to compare two examples of some of our more influential writers advising specific women in this position. Jerome in his letter to Furia on the duty of remaining a widow adjures her to think of her high forebears, the Furii Camilli whom he represents as, almost to a woman, remaining faithful to one husband if widowed. If pagan women can achieve this, how much more ought not Christian women to be equally capable; and, true to form, he represents marriage as a great evil from which Furia has fortuitously escaped, full of such mundane cares as property, the household and servants: 'you have lost your virginity to no profit: now stay chaste'. Chrysostom's advice is more sensitive to the situation; in his Letter to a Young Widow he shows far more awareness of the recipient's grief and bewilderment at her situation; his letter is full of words of comfort; rather than suggesting with Jerome that she must be relieved, if not happy, to have done with the turmoils of the married state, he fully appreciates and condones her feelings of grief, adjuring her not to fret 'because his greatness was cut short' and reminding her that at least she was there when he died, unlike the wives of soldiers; and offers her the comfort that her much-loved husband is in heaven and she can still love him - and show it best by keeping her bed sacred to his memory. This, he says, is the worst blow she can endure but the Lord will comfort her, and 'you will display among us a heavenly manner of life'. Despite his seeming poor opinion of the breed in general, this is a sensitive treatment of his correspondent, and his advice far more palatable thereby. [40]

Certainly, whatever the personal griefs and hardships, from the point of view of the Church, the lot of the 60-fold seems to have been easier. Despite opinions that 'virginity is the easier because virgins know nothing of the promptings of the flesh, and widowhood is harder because widows cannot help thinking of the licence they have enjoyed in the past' and despite troubles of the household, estate, children - or, indeed, because of them, the life of the widow, fuller and more occupied than that of the virgin, seems to have been less prone to dramatic upset of the scandalous variety we have seen afflicting misled virgins. [41]

Widowhood and practice

In some communities the widows had duties which equate them with the church hierarchy, possibly those later subsumed by the deaconesses, for Clement of Alexandria sets them after the three male orders as 'persons of distinction' (eklekta prosopa) and Origen speaks of them as ranking with those enjoying definite ecclesiastical status (ekklesiastike time) but says that there is no reason for them to be accorded this if their only function is foot-washing, which can be done by servants and domestics. The Apostolic Church Order requires the appointment of three widows, 'two to devote themselves to prayer on behalf of all those who are tempted and to revelations, to whatever extent is necessary, one to succour women who are sick'; 'They must be ready to help, they must be temperate and make the necessary reports to priests.' However, the Egyptian Church Order states unequivocally that 'the widow is instituted for prayer which is the function of all Christians' and the Didascalia Apostolorum that their mission is 'nothing else than to pray for benefactors and for the whole church'; further that 'if questioned, she will not reply...she will refer the questioner to those in the Church'. 'Now what makes this work especially suitable to widows but their bereavement and desolate condition?' Augustine wrote to Proba. He somewhat confuses the issue by

imputing by a kind of poetic licence that everyone 'is in this world bereaved and desolate as long as he is a pilgrim absent from his Lord' and that therefore everyone should be 'careful to commit his widowhood, so to speak, to his God as his shield in continuous and most fervent prayer' - but thus clearly preserves the association between widowhood and prayer. [42]

This combination of the prayerful with the Church functionary is reflected in some of the respects in which they were regarded as serving their communities. We can see evidence of the respect accorded them as communicators of the 'revelations' indicated above in the vision related with evident satisfaction by Evodius to Augustine experienced by 'a respectable widow from Figentes, a handmaid of God...twelve years in widowhood' who saw (reassuringly for her congregation) heaven receiving with honour the body of 'the young man, the son of the presbyter, who was cut off yesterday'. Augustine himself might use a widow of the Order as a messenger, as when he entrusted to the agency of the widow Galla his gift to bishop Quintilianus of relics of the protomartyr Stephen. But ultimately, this tendency to the contemplative brings them into the orbit of the virgins, with whose ideal they cannot adequately compete; ultimately, as Danielou has said, as a separate tendency and practical force the Order went into decline, a prey to its own ambiguities, its contemplative aspect given greatest expression by the virgins and its quality of service held in dubious regard as to its propriety and ultimately subsumed in the flourishing office of the Deaconess. Indeed Danielou considers the only characteristics the widows retained right up until the effective disappearance of the Order around the end of the 4th Century were that of a general body of aged women whom the community succours, to whom their title gives charitable rights which they sometimes abuse. This being so it is understandable that writers such as Jerome were cautious in recommending younger,

wealthier women to the life; this sets in context the rise of the office of Deaconess. [43].

As with the virgins, then, at this time the most notable exempla of this category carved out their own rules and structure according to their own circumstances and inclinations. And to set against negative evidence from the fathers about recalcitrant and unwilling widows, we also have a considerable showing of virtuous, restrained and eminently pious widows, and not least from those who complain most about their truculence as a breed. Jerome adjures Furia if she is considering a life of avowed widowhood to set her standards by the pinnacle achieved by Marcella who 'while she maintains the glory of her family has given an example of the gospel life' when widowed after 7 months. Marcella does indeed seem to have been something out of the ordinary, not only in her lifestyle, though it should be remembered that she was amongst the first of her kind and that those practising similar disciplines were frequently her imitators; but also, given her lack of precedents, in her certainty and decision in its application. She worked out its details in large part for herself, from what she had read of the Desert communities; of 'the blessed Anthony, then still alive, and of the monasteries in the Thebaid, founded by Pachomius, and of the discipline laid down for virgins and for widows'. Worlds away from her cushioned urban existence at the centre of known civilisation, it was an unlikely pattern to come to with such eagerness; and it was entirely her initiative, only later endorsed, advised on and publicized by Jerome, a young priest from Dalmatia - drawn into her circle at her instance and insistence. When embarking on her lifestyle, she put off the clothing appropriate to her rank, selecting instead 'clothing meant to keep out the cold and not to show her figure' and put off all jewels, 'choosing to store her money in the stomachs of the poor, rather than to keep it at her own disposal'. She kept close to her mother at all times,

selected only virgins and widows for company 'and these women serious and staid' and avoided men; she 'would never see without witnesses such monks and clergy as she was required to interview'. In common with her virgin sister Asella, she 'fasted in moderation, abstained from eating meat and knew the smell of wine more than its taste, taking it for the sake of her stomach and her frequent illnesses. She rarely used to go out in public and scrupulously shunned the houses of noble ladies so that she might not be forced to see that which she had renounced. She frequently visited the basilicas of apostles and martyrs for private prayer, and avoided the crowded throng of people.' She also implemented 'long study' and 'constant meditation', dragging Jerome unwillingly into expanding the education of herself and her ladies in her search for knowledge, and, both before and after his departure for the Holy Land, keeping him so well plied with searching questions that he was driven to protest at the demand upon his time they required. Such was her intellectual curiosity that she was drawn into controversies herself, to the extent of teaching and answering the queries of others; saving always that 'when she was thus questioned, she would reply as if her answer was not her own but from me or some other man, in order to confess that what she taught she herself had learned from others. For she knew that the apostle had said "I do not permit a woman to teach" lest she seem to inflict an injury on the male sex and on those priests who were enquiring about obscure and doubtful points.' [44]

What we know of Paula's ascetic life is in detail only for the period after she had left Rome for a conventual life proper. This being so, her 'rule' was similar to Marcella's: she maintained the customary segregation and 'never sat at meat with a man' even if he were a bishop, 'never entered a bath except when dangerously ill' and 'even in the severest fever, she did not rest on an ordinary bed, but on the ground covered only with a mat of goat's hair' in the little time she rested

between making 'day and night alike a time of almost unbroken prayer'. She attempted to entirely subjugate her physical needs. 'Her self-restraint was so great as to be almost immoderate; her fasts and labours were so severe as almost to weaken her constitution'; using even very little oil except on feast days, she completely eschewed 'wine, sauce, fish, honey, milk, eggs and other things agreeable to the palate'. However, 'when she fell herself she made no concessions to her own weakness', refusing to take even 'a little light wine' at the instance of her doctors and bishop Epiphanius whom Jerome had appealed to to prevail upon her. Her discipline of study was equally voracious; she 'knew the holy scriptures by heart', learned Hebrew 'so well that she could chant the psalms in Hebrew and could speak the language without a trace of Latin pronunciation', and, like Marcella, plied Jerome keenly with questions as to scriptural interpretations. She further burdened herself with personal debt, borrowing money at interest to feed the poor. Her daughter Blesilla, who started out as rather a "merry widow" also succumbed eventually to Jerome's oratory and took to asceticism with such fervour that her premature death was arguably attributable to it. [45]

Melania the Elder was equally uncompromising in her conception of the duty of the widow. Widowed at twenty-two, she carefully set her family affairs in order and entrusted her son Publicola to the guardianship of the Praetorian Prefect, then decamped for the Holy Land, where for the next forty years she traversed the land, helped clerics, intimidated officials, instituted a monastery with Rufinus and 'at her own expense, she assisted churches, monasteries, guests and prisons'. She ministered to the Fathers of the Desert 'from her private wealth', tending to their need in the desert and assisting them in prison; and along with their hospitality, she and Rufinus were held to have educated recipients of their charity: 'both of them received those who turned up

in Jerusalem for the sake of a vow, bishops, monks and virgins; at their own expense, they edified all those who passed through. They united the four hundred monks involved in the schism over Paulinus, and having convinced every heretic who fought against the divinity of the Holy Spirit, they led them back to the Church.' In later life she saw her mission as best expressed in an attempt to browbeat the remaining worldlings of her family into a life of renunciation, ably seconded by her granddaughter and namesake. Her ministry and its implications will be considered in more detail in Chapter five. [46]

John Chrysostom also knew exemplary widows: the renowned Olympias was at least technically a widow, having been married for a brief span. She enjoyed something of the ambiguous status attested for Macrina, though in reverse, since for Macrina the title of widow was the complimentary one as she was merely betrothed and not actually married. Olympias, though she was widely accredited with maintaining her virginity - 'by the goodness of God she was preserved uncorrupted in the flesh and in spirit' - was ipso facto a widow, and a fairly formidable one. This was despite a far more unfavourable set of circumstances than any of the other exempla faced; to achieve her legitimacy as a widow proper in the eyes of the Church she had to resist, in seemingly complete isolation, a barrage of coercive forces, not excluding Imperial displeasure. 'Left an orphan, she was joined in marriage to a husband' Nebridius, urban prefect of Constantinople, of whom 'the debt of nature was shortly demanded'; reputedly 'she remained a blameless virgin to the end.' The next time around, she exercised her own choice: having considered and rejected the dictat of Paul to Timothy that 'I wish young widows to marry', not unnaturally in one who had 'birth, wealth, a very expensive education, a naturally good disposition and was adorned with the bloom of youth', 'her untimely widowhood became the subject of mischief' and the emperor Theodosius 'took pains to unite her in

marriage with a certain Elpidius, a Spaniard, one of his own relatives'. Upon her refusal, he placed her and her possessions under the guardianship of Clementinus, the urban prefect, until her thirtieth year; Clementinus continually urged Elpidius' suit and forbade her to visit the church or meet with clerics. Upon his return from suppressing the revolt of Maximus, Theodosius discovered her still steadfastly refusing marriage, and, apparently impressed 'since he had heard of the intensity of her ascetic discipline', gave her control over her own fortune. She promptly distributed large quantities of it in largesse to the Church, entirely supporting several bishops, most notably Chrysostom himself; and set up her house as a convent. Her ministry will also be examined in greater detail in chapter five; for her personal rule, she followed the formulaic pattern 'so that nothing can be found greater than what she did... For she abstained from eating meat and for the most part went without bathing, but if the necessity for a bath arose because of sickness (for she suffered continually in her stomach), she came down to the waters with her shift on, out of modesty'. 'There could be nothing cheaper than her clothing; the most ragged items were coverings unworthy of her manly courage. And she cultivated in herself a gentleness so that she surpassed even the simplicity of the children themselves...her whole intolerable life was spent in penitence and in a great flood of tears.' In addition she had all the requisite virtues of 'an appearance without pretence...a face without adornment; she kept watch without sleeping, she had an immaterial body, a mind without vainglory, intelligence without conceit...unbounded generosity, contemptible clothing, immeasurable self-control'. She 'catechized unbelieving women...called from slavery to freedom her myriad household servants, then proclaimed them to be of as much honour as her own nobility'. [47]

As regards the service of such notable exempla to their community, as we have seen the Church canons provided little practical scope. They are encouraged to minister to each other, and to those inferior to them in the congregational pecking order, i.e. married women and penitents; for properly-conducted virgins to consort with these representatives of what they were forbidden was, as we have seen, not well regarded. However, be the opinion of the Fathers what it might, one of the most frequently attested and important functions of these more dedicated widows was supervision of the 'more princely order' of virgins - witnessed to and praised by some of the same writers who deplore easy access between the two orders. 'It was in Marcella's cell that Eustochium, that paragon of virgins was gradually trained' in the days in which they were pioneering their particular route in Rome. Eustochium's training was completed by her mother in the Holy Land; her place in Marcella's cell was taken by the noble virgin Principia, to whom Jerome's eulogy of Marcella was addressed. Marcella subsequently acted as her virgin companion's protectress in the sack of Rome, persuading the barbarians to escort them unharmed to the basilica of St. Paul. Following Marcella's lead, 'monastic establishments for virgins became numerous'. Marcella's friend in ascesis, Lea, also the motivating force in a religious society at Rome, though she 'as a widow held a lower place' than the virgin Asella, yet 'showed herself a true mother to the virgins in [the convent]' and set them the example of religious life: she 'wore rough sackcloth instead of soft clothing, spent nights sleeplessly in prayer...neglected her dress and hair and ate only the coarsest food. Still, in all that she did, she avoided ostentation'. In sum she 'instructed her companions more by example than by precept'. Paula too, apart from personal austerity, dealt strictly with the 'girls who had accompanied her'. 'Surrounded by companies of virgins', she was always 'least remarkable in dress, speech, action, walk' and exemplar to those still steeped in the values

of their previous life: she imposed dire regimens, and if they were 'troubled by fleshly desires' her remedy was to redouble their fasting, 'for she wished her virgins to be ill in body rather than suffer in soul'. She kept a hawk-like eye on their purity: 'So strictly did Paula keep them separate from men that she would not allow even eunuchs to approach them, in case of giving cause for slanderous people to gossip'. She enforced strict equality of clothing and appearance, allowed none of the high-born girls to be served by maids of their own household, kept them busy with chores, portions of scripture to learn every day, and garment-making, and oversaw personally all they did, coaxing or scolding or morally uplifting them; and, as with Elias and Augustine, one of her most crucial responsibilities was that 'when the sisters quarrelled amongst themselves, she reconciled them with soothing words.' Melania had round her in Jerusalem 'a group of fifty virgins' besides ministering to virgins who 'passed through' - presumably on pilgrimage. In addition, she was accorded some of the credit for the dedication of Eunomia, virgin daughter of Avita (who adopted a continent marriage with Apronianus): according to Paulinus, related to both cousins, 'Eunomia is the "sister" of Melania, and in a sense her daughter, for she takes pleasure in sticking close to her, adopting her sister as her teacher...[Christ] hears Eunomia, schooled by the guiding voice of Melania' and Eunomia in her turn 'guides with her pure voice the blessed female chorus'; for in Melania's triumphal return to family haunts 'follows a large train of noble ladies, a dedicated crowd of virgins sharing the same colour of the one fleece [of virtue]'. Olympias had in her monastery 'her chambermaids, numbering fifty, all of whom lived in purity and virginity' in addition to 'Elisanthia, her relative...also herself a virgin...with her sisters Martyria and Palladia, also virgins'. They attracted 'many other women of senatorial families...so that all those who gathered together according to the grace of God in that holy fold of Christ numbered two hundred and fifty,

all adorned with the crown of virginity and practising the most exalted life'. [48]

Widowed mothers of promising virgins were particularly applied to in the all-important matter of guarding the vocation of their daughters, whether or not they personally were under such strenuous vows: for 'a daughter may be as religious as she pleases; still, a mother who is a widow is a guarantee for her chastity'. So Juliana is addressed as a matter of course as 'you who approve of it and rejoice in it', in the discussions about Demetrias' vocation. Augustine's congratulations on her decision to take vows and his anxious counsel that she should disregard Pelagian teachings are addressed to Juliana; Augustine is perhaps more cautious than Jerome in the proprieties of addressing virgins directly. Certainly he entrusts Juliana with the interpretation and transmission of his teaching to Demetrias. Augustine's widow-envoy to Quintilianus, Galla, has with her 'her daughter Simplicia, a consecrated virgin, who is subject to her mother by reason of age, though above her by reason of holiness' in the usual formula. Paula, as we have seen, kept Eustochium under her vigilant eye; Emmelia, though cast in the role by her daughter Macrina, performed the same function: 'her father had by this time departed this life...she shared her mother's toils, dividing her cares with her, and lightening her heavy load of sorrows. At one and the same time, thanks to her mother's guardianship, she was keeping her own life blameless, so that her mother's eye both directed and witnessed all she did'. [49]

Marcella, Melania and Olympias represent the breed of those for whom the decision had been early made by their, in the main, Christian parents for marriage, a decision they later elect to overturn; many of those Jerome refers to disparagingly as being in the 60-fold and whose marriages Augustine refers to as disqualifying them from being able to take Christ as their spouse and thus being in the front-rank of the

pious we may take to have been virgins manqué. Macrina would have been amongst their number but for the turn of events. Nonetheless, for those such as Marcella, Melania, Paula, Juliana, and arguably Olympias and Macrina, widowhood, if strictly regarded, is a notable focus for the ethos of holy renunciation and they augment it by their example. Ultimately, however, despite the alacrity with which Marcella, Melania and Olympias took to it, the state of widowhood retained its aura of being a less than enviable condition; Gregory of Nazianzus considers his sister fortunate because 'why should I say more of her compassion to widows than that the reward which she obtained was never to be called a widow herself?' [50]

1. Jerome, Ag. Jov. I.3; Aug. On the Good of Marr.. 1; On the Sermon on the Mount I.15.40; Let. 150; Gregory of Nyssa. On Virg. 4, 8, 9, 41
2. Ibid. 8; Hom. 19 on I Cor. VII.7; Jer. Let. 22.6; Aug. on the Good of Wid.. 11; Jer. Let. 22.15
3. On the Priesthood. 314. 315
4. On Virginity 2.3; 14.1
5. Apostolic Constitutions 8.24.2
6. On the Veiling of Virgins 4; Jer. Let. 22.21; Paulinus of Nola. Let. 23.43
7. Pelagius, Epistle to Demetrias 11; Aug. Let. 188.4-5; Basil of Ancyra, On Virginity (fragmentary) PG 30.669-810.
8. Jer. Lets. 130.6; 22.15; Augustine On the Good of Widowhood; Jer. Lets. 22.17; 130.12 & 18; Basil of Ancyra On Virginity PG 30.718.
9. John Chrysostom On the Priesthood 314-5; Jer. Lets. 22 & 24; Gregory of Nyssa, Life of St. Macrina; Basil of Anc.On Virg.. trans Rousselle, op. cit. p. 123; Gerontius, Life of Melania the Younger sec. 23
10. Jer. Let. 24.2; Tert., on the Veiling of Virgins 11; Aug. Let. 254 & 255; And perhaps more significantly, he roundly rebukes Benenatus for proposing for her a marriage that would not strengthen the church (Let. 253). Amb. On Virg. I.57, 59
11. Apostolic Consitutions 8.24.2; Jer. Let. 130.11 & 17; PJ. 4.19
12. Jer. Let. 24.3 & 4;
13. Ibid. 107.7-8; 130.12-15; Paulinus of Nola, Let. 13.60
14. Ibid. 108.27; Gregory of Nyssa, op. cit. cols. 964D - 966D; 970A
15. Jer. Let. 130.6; Aug. Let. 150; 188.4
16. Jer. Let. 66.3; Greg. of Nyssa, op cit. cols 966C & 972C
17. Aug. Let. 263
18. Liber. Pont. I p. 531; cited in Peter Brown, 'The Christianisation of the Roman Aristocracy', JRS 51 (1961), p. 10. Greg. Nyssa op. cit. 966D; LH 31
19. LH 33; Alph. Ammonas 8, Theodore of Eleutheroplis 3; PJ 5.29; Aug. Let. 211.11
20. Ibid. 211.1,4; LH 29
21. Jer. Let. 147; Ephraim, Life of Maria the Harlot
22. Anon. Apophth. 32; 188; 63
23. Aug. Let. 35.2; 108.7
24. LH 28 & 37.12; Jer. Life of Hilarion 21
25. Hans Achelis, "Agapetae", Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. ed. James Hasting, 1.177; cf. also Virgines Subintroductae; Derrick Sherwin Bailey. Sexual Relation in Christian Thought, p. 33
26. cf. Elizabeth A. Clark, "John Chrysostom and Subintroductae", Church History 46 (1977) pp. 171 - 185; Gregory of Nyssa, On Virginity 23; Basil of Caesarea, Let. 55; Gregory of Nazianzus, Epigrammata 10-20; See Pierre de Labriolle, "Le 'Mariage Spirituel' dans l'Antiquite Chretienne", Revue Historique 137 (1921) p. 222 for a list of councils condemning the practice; Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines and Quod Regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant; Alph. Cassian 26, amongst other examples.
27. John Chrysostom Quod reg. 5-6; Adv. eos 4, 7; Clark. art. cit. p.176; Jerome Lets. 123.14, 50.4
28. Jerome Let. 117.3 & 9
29. Clark, art. cit. p. 181, 183-4; Chrysostom Adv. eos 9, 11; Quod. reg. 6
31. I Tim. 5:9 ff.
32. Jer. Lets. 38.3; 123.1

33. Ibid. 6; I Tim. 5:3-5,9,16
34. Jerome, Lets. 79.1 & 7-8;
35. Ibid. 108.30; 123.2; Augustine On the Good of Widowhood; John Chrysostom Letter to a Young Widow
36. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood 315; Jerome, Lets. 22.16, 79.90 & 123.3
37. Let. 22.15; on the Good of Widowhood 20. 25
38. Jer. Let. 54.14; Chrys. On the Priesthood 13 ff.; On not Marrying Again, particularly 1 & 5; partially trans. in Elizabeth A Clark, Women in the Early Church.
39. On the Priesthood 302 - 306
40. Jer. Let. 54.6; Chrys. Letter to a Young Widow 6; - compare this with Gregory Nazianzen's consolation of his mother in his funeral address on his father, given at the head of this section.
41. Jer.Let. 123.11
42. Clem. of Alex. Paed. 3:12,97; Origen Or. 28:4; Ap. Ch. Ord. 21; Did. Ap. 15.123; cf. Fr. J. Danielou: The Ministry of Women in the Early Church, p. 18; Augustine Let. 130.30
43. Lets. 158 & 212; Danielou, art. cit. passim
44. Jer. Lets. 54.18, 127.4, 7, 9-10
45. Ibid. 54.2; 108.15, 17, 21. 27; 38.4
46. Palladius, LH 46, 54
47. Life of Olympias, Deaconess, passim; the length of her marriage is given variously as 'a few days' (LH 56), 'less than a year' (Life 2), and '20 months' (Pall. Dial. 60)
48. Jer. Lets. 127.1, 3, 5, 7; 23.2; 108. 14-15; 20; Pall. LH46. Paul. Natalicia 21.60; Life of Ol. 6
49. Jer. Let. 117.5; Aug. Lets. 150, 188.6, 212; Greg. Nyssa Life of Mac. 966B
50. Greg. Naz, Or. 8.12

'The bed undefiled': marriage and sanctity

This chapter will discuss the married women of conspicuous piety. I shall consider to what extent being a Christian matrona was different from being a pagan matrona of a century earlier; whether her relations with her husband, gens and offspring were visibly altered, specifically in terms of her Christianity; and how they altered in different echelons of society. I shall also examine whether they could change the life-choices of their men, and to what extent; and what, if any, their aspirations were, if they did seem to change the status quo in their environs. We must also consider how great is the influence of ascetic Christianity on marriage itself and the concept of marriage: whether the Christian married couple will go on being Peter Brown's 'miniature of civic order' [1] given that their aims are supposedly being remodelled along eschatological lines at odds with many of the ideals of public life. This will lead us to a consideration of whether there is in our period a real 'problem' with marriage that equates with the Fathers' perception of it as a potential problem; to what extent the wives absorb the patristic ideals for womanhood, and to what extent the Fathers modify these goals to suit married women they know. We must ask if under these circumstances marriage can be an end in itself or if it is necessarily a consolation for lost chastity, and what is the credit accorded to bringing up a saint or a family of bishops relative to that of maintaining a continent marriage. Continent marriage is seen as one halfway point for the uncertain, but is subject to ambiguities; I shall further examine whether it is seen as a real achievement in its own right, or if it is only for those who cannot make the final break; and whether the Church fostered a competition in chastity between man and wife.

Pre-Christian impressions of marriage

Social Expectations

In Roman society, marriage was a private act not requiring the sanction of a public authority, having its basis, as so much else in Roman life, in the familia as a legal and social unit; the laws to do with marriage predominantly express concern over the protection of the property-base of the familia. This private act, then, was indicated primarily in the consent of the two individuals concerned; hence the perplexities of the jurists trying to ascertain whether two individuals were in fact married or not. Ultimate proof often rested merely on intention, a difficult thing to prove. [3] (Macrina's statement that she considered herself married although her betrothed died before they could seal the union becomes less of a display of principle and more of an actual difficulty, when one considers the Roman legal difficulties in actually ascertaining the legal standing of a couple with regard to wedlock.) Under the Republic and early Empire, divorce was correspondingly easy with the simple utterance by the husband - and, occasionally, in later times, by the wife, of the words tuas res tibi habeto: 'take your things'. [4] There was a fairly well-established tendency amongst the aristocrats in the republic of undertaking marriage merely in order to increase property or secure political alliances, hence the need for a fairly flexible legal attitude. However, in the later Imperial era, attitudes changed. With increasingly paternalistic legislation on moral behaviour and literary rhetoric which frequently seems to prefigure much of the attitudes later bruited by the Church on familial relations, there is much evidence that 'at some point people began to internalize, as a moral code, what had been a civic and dotal institution: monogamous marriage'. [5] With the promotion of the ideals of familial homonoia and concordia, marriage as a self-conscious concept had arrived.

The change in the representation of marriage points to more equality of emotional support, more importance placed on domestic harmony and some sharing of responsibilities: the wife as a friend, 'life's companion', rather than 'the accessory to the working of the citizen and paterfamilias' as previously. Seneca saw the marriage bond as comparable in every way to the pact of friendship, bringing with it an exchange of obligations. Plutarch and Pliny the Younger lauded the nobility of higher friendship as a form of conjugal love; Pliny wrote unusually fond and frequent letters to his wife when they happened to be separated even for a short period, and Plutarch wrote a treatise of conjugal advice advocating tolerance and patience on both sides, but specifically encouraging the bride into dependence on her spouse: 'A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends with him' and 'a woman ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband'. Marcus Aurelius congratulated himself on having found in his Empress 'so obedient a wife'. [6] These ideas of marriage as a mutual support, however, still go in tandem with notions of the wife as a 'grown child' in need of tutelage and at risk from the exigencies of the political and business world, the education of whom it is the husband's duty to complete - insofar as he sees fit. Though she may exercise a great degree of financial control if sui iuris (independent), still she must be protected from making rash admissions on her tax returns; though encouraged to improve her mind, she must be guarded from imbibing dangerously destabilizing intellectual flim-flam. [7] Industria, however, was seen to be healthy in combating temptations to the virtuous wife: physicians recommended that women be given charge of the house as 'to supervise the slave baker, oversee the steward's purchase of supplies and tour the house to make sure everything is in order' was more healthful than sitting about - let alone that it gave less time for intrigues.

For the wife participating in the 'higher friendship' was subject to some of the same notions as affected the Victorian 'Angel in the House': one's wife was not to be treated as a mistress, that is, subjected to passion or affectionate cuddles; in an anticipation of the Fathers, Seneca gives the rationale for physical love as solely the making of babies, thus it should be performed sparingly, on a basis of reason, not lust or fondness. Indeed later Christian authors such as Clement of Alexandria used some stoic bases for certain of their arguments. Christian practices - and Christian couples - in their turn influenced neo-Platonist adaptations of these principles. As early as the late second century, the physician Galen was struck by the sexual austerity of the Christian communities. [8] Peter Brown has argued that, lacking the clear ritual boundaries provided in Judaism by circumcision and dietary laws, this expressed their need to make the distinction between theirs and alien communities and present a united face to outsiders: that, in fact, 'they make their exceptional sexual discipline bear the full burden of expressing the difference between themselves and the pagan world' expecting that 'a person who is an exception on this point will be an exception in other respects as well'. [9] It remains to examine how far this was perceptibly borne out in the experience of Christian married couples.

Male expectations of marriage

We have already examined in Chapter 2 the universal expectation (certainly for girls) <u>for</u> marriage; but despite the change in rhetoric which we looked at above regarding the state, Roman expectations of marriage up to the era in question from the husband's point of view seem to have remained on the whole low. The Romans had a very matter-of-fact attitude to the likelihood of marital harmony; there was less option about the matter of whether or not to marry, and so, it seems, less choosiness about the object of marriage. Epigraphically, 'she never

gave me any cause to complain' is as frequent a comment as 'very dear wife'. [10] Pre-Christian Roman marriage ideas had more to say about notions of civic duty than about theories that would be postulated by Christians of the 'help-meet'; Pliny and Seneca's 'higher friendship' had undercurrents of the desirability of public observation of this laudable end. Antipater of Tarsus regarded marriage as a duty in order to provide one's country with new citizens, and because the divine plan of the universe requires the propagation of the human race. The foundation of marriage according to Musonius is procreation and mutual support. It has been suggested, then, that the married couple came to assume in public something of a miniature of civic order: 'The eunoia, the sumpatheia, the praotes of the relations of husband and wife echoed the expectations of grave affability and unquestioning class loyalty with which the powerful man both lovingly and firmly embraced and firmly controlled his city.' [11] For besides being a civic duty in itself, marriage, particularly if up the social scale, as a venture into 'respectability' and an obvious move away from the irresponsibilities of youth, often carried with it enrollment into the ranks of worthy burgherdom. For a provincial it could entail expectations of undertaking the liabilities consonant with one's increased dignity as a householder, of serving on the town council, collecting taxes, or undertaking civic improvements. Small wonder that some - even from the more solidly probrious ranks of provincial respectability, like Augustine - balked at the prospect of being part of a socio-civic unit as 'Husband' and opted instead for a 'second-class marriage' - a liaison, often extremely lasting, with a concubine. [12]

Concubinage must be considered in the context of notions on marriage: it seems to have been a viable and well-regarded alternative to all the implications of marriage, for those yet with their way to make who are not interested in local ties, like Augustine, or for

widowers, maybe with a family not to be supplanted. Jane Gardner has observed a tendency for the men in such unions to be of higher status than the women; concubinage also provided an outlet for alliances which, if conducted in the proper form would have been regarded as mesalliances, or would have been simply illegal, as with probrosae (morally reprehensible women) or women with no conubium (legal capacity for marriage). But the boot could be on the other foot: Callixtus, a former slave who became pope from 214 - 218 'authorized' senatorial women who did not wish to lose their privileges for marrying below their class to live in concubinage with plebeians and freedmen - this, seemingly because of a shortage of eligible men, may also say something about Callixtus' view as a former slave; or may indicate that for some, living with a believer without conubium was better than with a more socially equal pagan.

This kind of liaison was not without its risks: Ulpian warns that sexual relations with one's concubine might be regarded as stuprum unless the woman is probrosa and warns men off living with free or freedwomen - both of whom occur in noticeable numbers as concubines. [13] The status was regarded as honourable to a fair degree: 'it conferred upon the woman a dignity that would not have been possible had her relations with the man not been stable and monogamous.' In fact, such women could attain the status of matronae. [14] Hence the possibility even of prosecuting the unfaithful concubine for adultery, as long as she was of good standing, and only as a third party. [15] These women appear on tombstones legitimately after the wife, or in their own right. Libanius's figures in his autobiographical oration and Augustine's in his Confessions. 'Even the Catholic Church was prepared to recognize it, provided the couple remained faithful to one another.' Hippolytus, in the Apostolic Tradition ruled that 'a concubine who is a slave and has reared her children and has been faithful to her master

alone may become a hearer' though 'the man who is with a concubine must desist and marry legally'. [16] There is a probability that Augustine's concubine may in fact have been a devout catechumen throughout the years of her liaison with him; certainly she was a catholic and when finally parted from him went home vowing to observe the abstinence of a widow. Her influence on his waverings certainly should be considered in the same context as that of a christian wife on a pagan husband - Monica with Patricius, for example - as we will examine later in this chapter.

On more negative lines the expectations of the husband from his union were bolstered by an extensive corpus of law on adultery. This preoccupation reflects much more insecurity about property ownership initially than moral opprobrium. Epictetus reflects prevailing views in describing adultery as theft: to take one's neighbour's wife is as thoughtless as to snatch his serving of pork from his plate. 'Similarly, for women, the portions have been distributed among men.' The attitudes husbands expected from their spouses in the opposite case are exemplified in the advice that Plutarch addresses to young wives that (presumably as one of the duties of the higher friendship) they should be sweetly indulgent and shut their eyes to a little philandering rather than wreck a marriage; though he does also exhort the husband not to enrage his wife unduly - both should consider the holiness of procreation. [17] In fact Plutarch is simply giving a philosophical rationalisation of the well-documented legal double standard with regard to adultery; that a man might prosecute his wife for adultery - but not she him. [18] Further, if the wife was adulterous and the husband did not divorce and prosecute her he might himself be liable to prosecution under the lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis for lenocinium (pimping). In this respect Christian writers from Hermas onwards were taking a new line to advise behaviour counter to the law: canvassing the unprecedented view that an adulterous wife could repent, in which case

her husband should forgive her and take her back. In marriage or attempting to escape it, the odds were stacked against Roman women; it is small wonder that so many in our era, having been married when barely at puberty the first time, exercised a choice the second time around against the social 'norm'.

Despite the laws against the adulterous wife becoming even more oppressive in the Christian era [19], the position of the patristic writers perceptibly moves on from this (as it does not invariably improve on enlightened paganism in a lot of attitudes to married life). Though in Roman belief it might be better not to indulge in extramarital sex, as a courtesy more than a due to one's partner, or because character was held to derive from having the strength to resist vice [20], male chastity did not **matter** as such. Female inchastity could threaten bloodlines and property transfer, and so from the earliest times very much **did** matter: the moral opprobrium coming secondarily and as a back up to the 'portion of pork' stance. Christian writers in our period took the unusual attitude that faithfulness is the responsibility of both partners. 'Yes, I say, I command you' thunders Augustine, '...For so many years now, we have baptized so many men to no effect, if there are none here who preserve the vows of chastity they took'; and far from being acquiescent to preserve the marriage, 'I do not want Christian married women to lie down under this.' Chrysostom, too, presses for a single sexual standard:

> ..just as we punish women when, although they are married to us, they give themselves to others, so too are we punished, if not by Roman laws, then by God... The sexual act is adulterous not only when the woman is bound to another man; it is also adultery for the man who is himself bound to a wife. [21]

He stresses that this is so even when the other woman is free and unmarried; in fact, Chrysostom refutes in detail the legal position that only women's unchastity signified in marriage in a passage so full of reproach and repetition that we may infer that he too is meeting a dead

weight of inertia, if not opposition, from his hearers.

This brings us to the first major distinction in the study of Christian era wifedom: thus far we have dealt with the expectations encountered in the husbands, as does most of Roman tradition. What begins to distinguish our period is writers addressing themselves to and about wives, in more and greater detail, with advice to them and about them, admonishing, trying to tailor their behaviour and expectations, and giving evidence of confusion and crossed notions: Tertullian's Exhortation to his Wife and On the Dress of Women, Augustine's On the Good of Marriage, On Marriage and Concupiscence, John Chrysostom's The Kind of Women who ought to be Taken as Wives, besides all the homilies, letters and treatises dealing with them incidentally. Nor is this body of advice wholly preferential to the male side; the attitude is no longer that it behoved the husband to behave well as the rational half of the partnership, but that even if he did not, the wife must observe her proper station. Wives are to be seen admonishing their husbands, instructing them, and even drawing praise for so doing. The wife, in the new Christian rhetoric has a far more important place than formerly, just as the couple has a more significant place in the community as a representation of 'proper relations', of Christian to Christian and Man to God: in Peter Brown's resonant prose, 'married couples were expected to bear in their own persons nothing less than an analogue in microcosm of the group's single-hearted solidarity'. [22] In this analogue, the wife's position was altering: we must examine what was to alter directly in a wife's experience.

Family interactions and the effect of Christianity

The Christian Matrona in relation to her gens

A wife, unless married with manus (so rare as to be negligible in our period) derived all her own standing, as her property from her gens, her family by birth, regarded throughout marriage as remaining her family. Though she might marry up the social scale and acquire glory from her husband's status, this was as much a loan as any property he might favour her with; gifts between husband and wife were not valid in law, since each derived their property from the familia, which must not be diminished. Her husband's family would regard her to a certain extent as an outsider, and even if she died still married to the same man, to the day she died, she and they would consider her real family to be her gens; and her father, for as long as he lived after her marriage (unless, again, she married in manu) retained his patria potestas over her - to the extent of dissolving her marriage if he saw fit, as one of the 'consenting parties'. Her position with regard to her standing in the family she married into was thus precarious on all sides; and she need not expect that this position would be made any easier by the sympathy of those who might seem to be her natural allies, the women of her new family. Since her mother-in-law would have established her own standing in the family from a similar initial precariousness and with a great deal of her influence stemming from her relations with her male children, only to see it become vulnerable again through the injection of an outsider with greater claims on her son, small wonder if the bride experienced further alienation from the one person who might be expected to have the deepest understanding of her plight; hence Terence's 'all mothers-in-law hate their daughters-in-law'. Plutarch tells that in Lepcis, in Africa, the situation was formalised into a ritual whereby on being asked for a pot by the new bride on the day after her marriage, her mother-in-law would refuse it and, further, declare that she had none; the pot in this case being symbolic of assistance and support, for, says Plutarch 'her purpose being that the bride may from the outset realize the stepmother's attitude in her mother-in-law, and in the event

of some harsher incident later on, may not feel indignant or resentful... The one way to cure this trouble is to create an affection for herself personally on the part of her husband, and at the same time not to divert or lessen his attention for his mother'. This was exactly Monica's experience on marrying Patricius: not only did she have to win over her 'hot-tempered' husband but also a jealous mother-in-law egged on by 'tale-bearing servants'. As if having read Plutarch, she did exactly as he prescribed, and 'won over the older woman by dutiful attentions and patience and gentleness' until her won-over mother-in-law complained to Patricius instead about the servants and had him punish them, after which the two women 'lived in wonderful harmony'. The situation was not irremediable, therefore: but it must have been tense for many new brides, and contributory in its turn in reinforcing their dependence on their own gens after their marriage. [23]

This history of the importance of birth and family of origin is taken over by the Christian writers; it is a recurring theme in the sources. This is particularly true in the cases of the women from the top drawer of society; it is a minor obsession with the Fathers just how well-born some of their female adherents are. They trumpet their lineages with all the satisfaction of those who have three centuries of taunts of "slaves, criminals and greeklings" to avenge. Thus Jerome on Paula's inheritance of distinction: 'Of the stock of the Gracchi and descended from the Scipios, the heir and representative of that Paulus whose name she bore, the true and legitimate daughter of that Martia Papyria who was mother to Africanus' and of Marcella, of whom he says 'I will not set forth' in true Ciceronian style 'her illustrious family and lofty lineage ... her pedigree through a line of consuls and praetorian prefects'. Paulinus of Nola, a family connection, had an interest in Melania the Elder's resounding lineage: 'a noblewoman...of greater nobility than her consular grandfathers ... a woman of more elevated

rank ... Marcellinus the consul was her grandfather' and he makes the most of the extraordinary scene of her arrival in Rome, with so many glittering senators anxious not to be behindhand with appropriate courtesies to this sackcloth-clad scion of a noble house. Palladius, too, accords more importance to her derivation: 'She was a daughter of Marcellinus, one of the consuls' but only 'wife of a high-ranking man (I do not well remember which one).' Augustine, from less elevated social origins himself, seems rather to be slightly overwhelmed by the advent into his limited circle of the likes of Proba, Juliana and Albina, the cream of the aristocracy; it is not difficult to catch echoes of the young rhetor scrambling for place in Milan in the tone of his letters to these women: To Proba, addressed as 'noble lady, deservedly illustrious', 'it might indeed appear wonderful that solicitude about prayer should occupy your heart and claim the first place in it when you are noble and wealthy and the mother of such an illustrious family, as this world reckons such things', and to Proba and Juliana 'my daughters, most worthy of that honour due to your rank'. Nor is Gregory of Nyssa - an aristocrat himself, and in no doubt about the distinction of his own family and of its right to rule - reticent about the distinguished derivations of his subjects Macrina and Basil; and thus, incidentally, his own. Though all stress that birth should be outweighed by nobility of deeds, yet they cannot leave it alone; but that true nobility should be judged 'according to a better than the ordinary rule of noble or ignoble blood, whose distinctions depend not on blood, but on character; nor does it classify their families but as individuals' was the view of Gregory of Nazianzus, himself well-born. [24]

For, boasting apart, we are witnessing a new development of the old concept of birth. It has become a double-barrelled weapon for the Fathers with a newly visible concept of an "aristocracy of piety". It is something to boast of to have forebears, whether or not of

distinguished lineage, of distinguished piety - even of mere length of days in the Church. Gregory's mother's heritage from her gens, in the context of which the above statement came, was 'the faith that is pleasing to God'. Just as descendants of well-born families will boast of a consular tradition in their gens and antique habits of virtue, so Gregory parades his mother's patrimony: she 'was consecrated to God by virtue of her descent from a saintly family, and was possessed of piety as a necessary inheritance'. This it was, most precious in the writer's eyes, and presumably in those of his audience, which she 'had inherited from her ancestors'; and in accordance with notions of husbanding the property of the familia, 'this she increased and amplified' - by the conversion of her husband. And, 'having received virtue as her patrimony', in due form according to the duty owed to the familia, 'this golden chain she cast about her children'. Further, her inheritance bore favourable comparison with that of his father, Gregory the Elder: though 'every inch a gentleman', 'he sprang from a stock unrenowned and not well-suited for piety' but in attaching himself to Nonna, with her 'pious lineage', he was 'well grafted out of the wild olive tree to the good one'. Similarly, Emmelia, mother of Gregory of Nyssa and Macrina, was guided by these kind of influences: 'directed at all times by divine will', she named Macrina for her paternal grandmother, a renowned woman who 'confessed Christ like a good athlete in the time of the Persecutions'. Ageruchia, to whom Jerome addresses exhortations to remain a widow, though we do not know of her gens, is the third generation of devout Christian women, as well as a 'high-born lady'; 'around her stand her grandmother, her mother and her aunt, a noble band of tried Christian women' - and wives - and univirae. They are a true aristocracy of piety; 'do not your grandmother, your mother and your aunt enjoy even more than their old influence and respect, looked up to as they are by the whole province and the leaders of the churches?' Just so Melania the Younger's notions of piety - and her subsequent dictating

of terms to her husband - derived from 'tales of her grandmother', though her equally Christian parents tried to curb the wilder excesses of her zeal; her ultimate victory owed much to that formidable lady's presence. [25] Nonna also, as we will examine, had a good deal of say in her marriage; Gregory the younger's attitude was almost that her 'pious lineage' accorded her senior status. Just as aristocratic women of preceding centuries took their family pride and their dowry with them to their marriage - and, often, away from it again - and maintained the one and controlled the other against their husband's say, so Christian women brought their special legacy to their new families, and maintained their own ways. Sometimes, their in-laws welcomed these, and had a similar history, as Emmelia found when she married Basil. Laeta also, herself the product of a Christian mother and a pagan father, when she married Toxotius similarly found much in common with her in-laws; more, in this case, than she had with her husband, as Toxotius, withstanding the combined example of Paula, Paulina, Blesilla and Eustochium, was a pagan when she first married him. But sometimes, as Monica with Patricius, these women were grafted on from alien stock - and were working against the grain.

The Christian Matrona in interaction with her husband

What then, in a world only newly Christian, were husbands to expect from their wives? Might they no longer necessarily count on subservience as of right, if their wives were motivated by new systems of value and priority? Being male in a man's world might no longer guarantee sway in one's own household - they might even be regarded as at a disadvantage as having less status with the Faithful in a world of Faith. Evidence that men were in fact quickly aware of a new atmosphere and alert to the possibilities of upsets in their own household because of new loyalties comes as early as Plutarch, who stressed in his Conjugalia Praecepta:

> A wife ought to...enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in and to shut the door tight upon queer rituals and outlandish superstitions. For with no god do stealthy and secret rules performed by a woman find any favour.

Momigliano considers this to indicate that Plutarch was aware of a danger specifically from Christianity, which he 'must have known' was 'one of those cults which both attracted and accepted unaccompanied women'. [26] In our era we can see this disparity between married couples becoming open to discussion, and even acceptable as an appeal to piety.

This is not to say this was uniformly the experience: of the couples we actually know about, the responses varied and many husbands will have experienced little change in the natural order. The experience of the well-born women can tend to mislead one about the nature of the struggle; many Christian women must have fought a quiet, unnoted, campaign - if they fought at all - against the inertia of an uninterested husband. Augustine tells of the many women in his mother's circle who endured harsh treatment and relates that it behoved Monica to exercise great tact since her husband was fiercer than many of those who so suffered. But Monica found nothing to cavil at in such a situation: her attitude towards this, her son says, is that her friends were in the wrong to 'take the upper hand against their masters': that 'from the time they heard read aloud those matrimonial tablets, they should consider them instruments by which they had been made servants'. Monica's victory - for, sure enough 'at last she won for You even her own husband, at the end of his earthly life' - was the victory of diplomacy, of the silent witness. There is no evidence from Augustine's account of their married life that she employed the same proselytizing zeal with which she pursued her wayward son; possibly she scented a more certain hope of success in him than in her 'fierce', 'wrathful' husband.

Nothing more is implied in her conduct with Patricius than merely enduring, and maintaining her own faith; though it may be that the cumulative effect on Patricius was that of water wearing away a stone. [27]

Comparable with Monica is Gorgonia, the sister of Gregory of Nazianzus, and unremarkable daughter of the peerless Nonna. Her situation contains some similarities to Monica's: in the unexceptional quality of her marriage, and the undocumented struggle she waged with the similarly unpromising material of her 'unreasonable master', her husband, Alypius - of whom Gregory merely says truculently 'and if you wish me briefly to describe the man, I don't know what more to say of him than that he was her husband'. To her is also attributed the attitude that truly 'her husband was her head' and of 'confining herself within the due limits of a woman'. And she, too, achieved 'her one remaining desire', given as 'her husband's perfection'; but again, Gregory is uncharacteristically tight-lipped: 'nor did she fail of this' is all the notice this potentially meaty subject receives. There is something perhaps more in all this than we are learning; it would be interesting to know whether the so-pious Nonna had married her worthy daughter off to a pagan, or if Gregory's disapproval is the result of his brother-in-law being a believer who had backslid - hence he needed 'perfection', not conversion. [28]

The reticence with which Gorgonia's relations with her husband are treated is shown up in Gregory's florid treatment of his mother and father - 'the Abraham and Sarah of these, our latter days'. He relates her to have been active in the matter of her husband: she directly converted him, by her 'prayers, influence and example'. He, certainly, was not a pagan, but a Hypsistarian, a marginal sect whose existence we only know about from Gregory's funeral oration on him. Gregory enters into few details about the sect, saying merely that his father, before

he met Nonna, 'lived his life among idols' and that the sect was a combination of 'Greek error and legal imposture', worshipping fire and lights, observing cleanliness, but despising circumcision. Nonna was married to him while he was still a Hypsistarian; another example of the daughter of a settled Christian family being married off to a man socially but not religiously suitable. But Nonna was made of stern stuff:

> though surpassing all others in endurance and fortitude, she could not brook this, the being but half united to God, because of the estrangement of him who was a part of herself, and the failure to add to the bodily union, a close connexion in the spirit. On this account, she fell before God night and day, entreating for the salvation of her head with many fastings and tears, and assiduously devoting herself to her husband, and influencing him in many ways, by means of reproaches, admonitions, attentions, estrangements, and above all, by her own character, with its fervour for piety, by which the soul is specially prevailed upon and softened and willingly submits to virtuous pressure

- a process Gregory likens to water striking rock. Unsurprisingly, Gregory the Elder soon started to respond to the conditioning, and had a vision of his own, of himself singing psalms, 'which was strange to him'; she 'seized the opportunity' and the convenient proximity of a convocation of bishops, and Gregory was received into the church in short order by Leontius, the metropolitan. Only now, 'when he gave himself to the Lord, she both called him her husband and regarded him as such' - a re-statement of the Christian Church's sanction of disregard for societal norms and an implication that Nonna perhaps had not been at one with her distinguished family in her assessment of the criteria that made up a fitting husband. Small wonder, at all events, that 'some have both believed and said...that even her husband's perfection has been the work of none other than herself ... From her he learned his ideal of a good shepherd's life'. Her influence continued into his work as a bishop: 'not only...his assistant, but even his leader, drawing him on by her influence in deed and word to the highest excellence; ... not being ashamed, in regard of piety, even to offer herself as his teacher.

Admirable indeed as was this conduct of hers, it was still more admirable that he should readily acquiesce in it.' In this respect, Gregory Nazianzus declares that she was superior to Eve, who was only sent to be an helpmeet to Adam. Gregory the Elder was more promising material for 'making over' than Alypius, but Nonna must have been a force to be reckoned with. Gregory is a good, because a first-hand, witness; his account may be smoothed-out and full of the formulae proper to such encomia, but more telling than any of his rhetoric is his unquestioning acceptance of feminine influence as a power in the family. [29]

A direct contrast to Monica's gentle traction, and Nonna's irresistible force of will, is the outright independence of Melania the Younger - as portrayed by Gerontius and Palladius, writers who knew her only after the breach with the world had been made. This was another case of a daughter in opposition to family marriage plans; except that the husband in this case is Christian, just not extreme enough. After reluctantly falling in with family dynastic planning, and the failure of two pregnancies to produce an heir, Melania offered her husband a direct choice. If he wished to continue married life with her, he must 'practise asceticism with me according to the fashion of chastity', only under which conditions would he be 'my lord and master'; leaving him otherwise an option couched in terms perilously close to the formula of divorce: 'take my belongings and set my body free.' Pinianus was conspicuously unwilling to do either - Augustine attributes him with 'a strong natural capacity for enjoying this world' - 'but at last God had mercy on the young man and laid on him also an ardour for renunciation'. Melania's apparently dominant influence in her marriage is quite striking in the context of the attributes accorded to other Christian married women - even Nonna - of still revering their husband as 'the head', of valuing the silence proper to women, and so on. The rest of

the passage in Palladius relates entirely to Melania's ascetic doings; how she gave away upwards of 25,000 pieces of silver and gold to various churches, she freed 8,000 slaves, she sold off property in Spain, Aquitania, Taraconia and Gaul; though we know her husband was still with her, she is attributed with being the motivating force. The women are usually seen as the victims of marital politics, in which position Melania started out; but it is worth examining how much choice Pinianus had in the matter. As two sole scions of Christian aristocracy, the match was a fitting one: but there is much to say that Melania and Pinianus' parents did not rate its Christian fitness over its dynastic suitability. Pinianus' actual opinion of the marriage goes unrecorded, but he does show signs of considerable devotion to Melania. Though patently reluctant to have the consequences of his belief pushed to their logical conclusions, he does not give her up - but maybe, bearing in mind the obloquy meted out to Fabiola, who released herself from a difficult marriage to remarry, he would have been unwise to, once attached to Melania by the bonds of a union that has in our period moved a long way from the casualness of the classical era. [30]

These are examples of women of faith gaining the upper hand over husbands represented as being in some sort an initial drag on their piety. There is equal evidence, however, for Christian matronae seeing their roles as that of support and back-up for a husband of conspicuous piety, and in other regions than merely complementing their worship. Nonna, once she had made a bishop of Gregory, took on the duties of running their household and estate, the better to liberate him for the burdens of being a bishop. This she seems to have done remarkably ably: though Gregory the Elder and she 'rivalled each other' in 'considering their wealth to be common to all and in liberality in bestowing it' upon the needy, 'he entrusted the greater part of this bounty to her hand, as being a most excellent and trusty steward of such matters', in which

capacity 'by her skill, she secured the prosperity of the household'. There is a tension here of which Gregory Nazianzen, writing about it, shows himself to be aware; a great deal of rhetoric was being generated by other church sources concerned to prove that care for the things of one's household was by extension care for things of the world, and that properly pious men and women in the new mould would have no truck with such preoccupations. Gregory, however, carries out a neat job of tailoring his account of her everyday household management into received ascetic ideals. He indicates their inherently contradictory nature - Nonna showed 'as great a degree of skill' in household knowledge 'as if she had no knowledge of piety; and she applied herself to God and Divine things as closely as if she were absolutely released from household cares' - but still manages to neatly fit square peg into round hole, by essentially sidestepping the argument completely: 'allowing neither branch of her duty to interfere with the other, but rather, making each of them support the other', she is exceptional - merely because she is exceptional, he says, with breathtaking circularity of argument. 'Some women have excelled in thrifty management, others in piety, while she, difficult as it is to unite the two virtues, has surpassed all in both of them, both by her eminence in each, and by the fact that she alone has combined them together.' [31] A less doggedly idealistic assessment of a similar case is given by Paulinus of Nola, writing to his friends Aper and Amanda; married, but having recently decided to continue their marriage in continence, Aper exercised some kind of ministry, and Amanda had undertaken the duties of their household and estate, again to release him for it. Paulinus' attitude is signally different from Gregory's: it is a burden, and one that will inevitably draw her more into the world; and she is shouldering it as a sacrifice of herself 'by interposing her holy slavery so you may be shielded... She takes charge of secular business so that you may forget it' so that Aper may be better able to fulfil his vocation. But her sacrifice will better her

in the eyes of God; though lacking as much time for the piety of contemplation, still, 'in the transactions of the world she serves not the world but Christ, for whose sake she endures the world that you may avoid enduring it' and so 'she will not lose her share in your reward because of the exemplary scale of values by which she sought not her inclination but your salvation'. This, says Paulinus, is not at all the same thing as putting the world before Christ; and he praises her for leading him away from effeminacy and towards self-discipline. This last is a direct paraphrase, in fact, of Augustine's praise of Paulinus' own wife, Therasia, another case of a pious wife acting as a support-group for a pious husband. In writing to Paulinus, Augustine congratulates him on 'a wife who does not bring her husband to effeminacy' and who is one with him in spiritual ties the stronger because of their purity (a reference to Paulinus and Therasia's own continent marriage). [32]

The debate over married celibacy

A necessary corollary of any consideration of the relations between husband and wife, particularly if both were Christians in the 4th - 5th century period is an assessment of their attitude towards sexuality and producing children. The Christian communities were conspicuously more 'body conscious' than their pagan forebears had been, whether because they 'could show their concern for order and cohesion in the more domestic sphere of sexual self-discipline' or whether because the conquering of the sexual drive, more significantly than any other human transformation was held to symbolize 'a state of unhesitating availability to God and one's fellows, associated with the ideal of the single-hearted person'. Thus after fifteen-odd years of concubinage, Augustine made the decision that 'there is nothing I must flee more than the conjugal bed'. [33] The public adoption of such a transformation was pre-eminently one of the leadership ideals of the early church, to denote proper distance and dedication in a celibate clergy; but with the

spread of the appeal of asceticism, it may be seen that the struggle was being broadened in the increasingly eschatological mentality of the late Empire. To some in this climate, the simple act of taking a wife represented the lure of the world and the devil: for the much-admired desert monks, where illicit fornication was regarded as a temporary, and therefore venial, fall from grace, admitting of penitence and a return to the fold, the legal and apostolically-provided for institution of marriage represented a far more serious threat; the retreat into the world. Thus a 'great man' whose disciple was tempted and went off to get married is portrayed in the Sayings as having prayed that the disciple might not be polluted, to such effect that 'the moment he was bound to the woman' the young man died - 'and so was not polluted'. The same view heroized the stance of Abba Theonas who deserted his wife as a seductress when she declined the same scheme that Amoun had successfully imposed on his bride. At such a time, then, the view of Augustine was relatively moderate: he stressed the view that ideally, intercourse should take place only to conceive children, which was no more than austere pagans had demanded; that man was, after all a social animal, that children were the glory of marriage, and that obedience was better than continence. Nevertheless, to view a thing as inevitable is not the same as promoting it: he also advised his congregation that they should love the sexuality of their wives and the physical bonds of their families only as a Christian must love his enemies. [34] 'Augustine elucidated those aspects of intercourse that seemed to betray a deep-seated dislocation of will and instinct. Erection and orgasm hold his attention, for the will seemed to have no access to either .. for Augustine, these were vivid and apparently irreversible tokens in all human beings, men and women, married and continent, of the wrath of God against the pride of Adam and Eve in cutting themselves off from the will of God.' [35] However it was perceived, with such rhetoric prevalent in varying degrees amongst all the great orthodox writers, an

active choice, for full married life and 'the bed undefiled' or for continence and 'the great emulation of God's marriage with the Church' was incumbent on all Christian married couples.

Thus, scattered all over the sources are references - not necessarily laudations, often just a passing mention - to couples like Paulinus and Therasia and Aper and Amanda, making the effort to contain. But there seem to be different notions current, just as there are in the Fathers of the level of Christian obligation. Amongst our top-drawer matronae, for instance, Paula had children, even five of them; arguably because her husband wanted an heir, and she did not succeed in producing a boy until the fifth child. Her daughters Blesilla, Rufina and Paulina all married with no evident pressure to do otherwise from Paula; Eustochium was sufficiently young at the time of her decision, as we have seen, that it could be attributable to any variety of emotional causes, not least a desire not to leave her mother. It is worth also bearing in mind that Eustochium was, following the Christian Empire's prohibition on the exposure of unwanted children, amongst the first few generations that would see a new phenomenon: that of surplus daughters. Jerome does attribute to Paulina the desire that 'as soon as her union was blessed with offspring, she would live henceforth in the second degree of chastity', i.e. continence in marriage; but his is not a witness to take on trust in such matters, and even he makes no attempt to claim that she entered the union reluctantly, or even tried for children reluctantly. [36] Melania the Elder dutifully produced, and like Marcella, showed no signs of eschewing her obligations to the family until 'released' by the death of her husband and two small boys. Melania the Younger was 'forced' into marriage and with great reluctance persuaded to try for heirs; family obligation initially taking precedence over Christian even for as motivated and strong-willed a young woman as Melania. Therasia also had a son, Celsus, who had died

before she and Paulinus opted for continence. Olympias and Macrina, though they are represented as heaving a sigh of relief when their projected nuptials did not come off as planned, were lined up for marriage in the usual fashion with no reported opposition beforehand, such as Demetrias ultimately displayed. The sources do not relate Juliana and Proba's actual reaction to this last, they only infer it: such devout widows must of course be delighted - though both have previously demonstrated all the proper family feeling, and their ascetic fervour is restricted to remaining univirae after the deaths of their husbands, and writing elegant letters to the fashionable Christian philosophers of their day. There never seems to be any question of whether the very pious and strong-willed Nonna will keep 'the bed undefiled', or her daughter, Gorgonia, who had two sons and three daughters.

Indeed, Gregory of Nazianzus' position on Gorgonia's married state is fascinating. In his funeral oration on her, rather than spending his time adopting one of the stances as to whether marriage was as good as virginity or not, he accepts both sides of the argument and simply unites the virtues of each of them in Gorgonia's rather unlikely person.

> .in regard to the two divisions of the life of all, that is, the married and the unmarried state, the latter being higher and more divine though more difficult and dangerous, while the former is more humble and more safe, she was able to avoid the disadvantages of each, and to select and combine all that is best in both, namely the elevation of the one and the security of the other... For though she had entered upon a carnal union, she was not therefore separated from the spirit, nor because her husband was her head, did she ignore her first Head: but, performing these few ministrations due to the world and nature, according to the will of the law of the flesh...she consecrated herself entirely to God.

Gregory is thus aware of the distinction; but in his thought, as in that of Gregory of Nyssa in his On Virginity, concepts of chastity and virginity have become more spiritualized, and less simply equivalents for sexual abstinence. For Gregory of Nazianzus, aware of the dangers in asceticism of tending too far towards gnostic dualism, it is not the

body and its functions that are essentially evil but rather the 'fleshly will'. Thus he wishes to extend the possibility of a 'virginal' lifestyle to those who remain 'in the world' and projects this reconciliation of the married and the 'virginal' life on to his sister Gorgonia: '[She] proved that...it is Mind which nobly presides over both wedlock and virginity, and arranges and works upon them as the raw material of virtue under the master-hand of reason.' Virginity for him has become a much more theoretical quality, an inner substance rather than an external state, echoing Jerome and Chrysostom's 'virginity of mind, not body' argument seen in Chapter two. [37] Gregory, however, not only takes the idea to its logical conclusions but, uniquely, relates it to a specific example, his sister Gorgonia. His position, derived more from philosophy than a homiletic background such as that of Jerome and Chrysostom, is that virginity is equated with the philosophic ideal of apatheia, with the loss of all fleshly will, all subservience to the passions. However, the unmarried state does not necessarily confer this, though it is more conducive to it; and by the same token, it is possible to achieve apatheia within the married state, though more difficult because of the distractions and concerns of spouse and children. But Gregory considers it is possible to live in the world 'as if not', performing the duties of nature but not allowing one's will and desire to settle there; such that these tasks and concerns do not become ends in themselves. This happy estate he represents Gorgonia as having achieved, as we have seen; though he is far more reticent about the actual details of her domestic life than he is about his mother's.

Nonna's stance he also spends time in justifying: she specifically **wanted** children - 'she was anxious to see a man-child in the house: that is indeed a wish common to many people' - and it is represented as being acceptable for her to pray for them, 'imitating the cry of the holy Anna'. Even staunch ascetics are seen to connive at this: the

hermit Hilarion finds nothing wrong in curing women of sterility - as told us by Jerome. But Nonna apparently wished to have children in order to dedicate them to Christ. Gregory manages to play off both sides yet again by claiming that her procreation is actually consecrated; by her own pious descent, and by having children for God, specifically and avowedly. Both these notions are tied together when Gregory talks of the 'noble inheritance of fulfilling her vow'. Gregory's future was accordingly decided from birth: 'As soon as I made my appearance, straightway in the noblest of contracts I became another's.' [39]

Nonetheless, full marriage with procreation in the view of orthodoxy was a consolation prize for the absence of the capacity to contain chastely - which was, all agreed, a gift of God. Despite Gregory's fast footwork with the impossibly pious Nonna, and for all he might claim her as capable of the highest ascetic exigencies, yet 'there is a difference', he affirms solemnly; and as proof of her rightmindedness, it must be shown that she 'had a greater love for virginity' and was merely 'patient of the marriage bond herself', just as it must be shown that Gorgonia was aware of the preeminent virtues of virginity, however implausibly it is claimed that she combined them with marriage. [40]

Indeed, it is rather impertinent of Gregory to make that claim for Gorgonia, in the face of the many who accepted the consequences of the Apostle Paul's often-heard statement that 'if you are married you cannot pray', which is why Therasia, Melania the Younger, Amanda, Galla, Serenilla, Theodora and Avita all opt out of the carnal aspect of their marriages. And in opting out, they achieve new equality of status with their husbands in the eyes of our writers: in terms that specifically recall that 'God is the Head of man and man of woman'. Therasia and Amanda are commended for combating 'effeminacy' in their husbands;

Theodora, who vowed continence with her husband Lucinius was 'once a woman but now a man: once an inferior, but now an equal' 'for the difference of sex, while essential to marriage is not so to a continent tie'; continence in marriage is the prefiguration of that time when 'there will be no longer bond or free, Greek or barbarian, male or female, all will be one in Him'. [41]

Among the humiliores, however, with considerably less drum-beating and banner-waving, we find an even greater level of observance of this ideal - a far more routine assimilation of it into otherwise inconspicuous lifestyles. The Apophthtegmata of the desert fathers give many examples of humble couples living quiet and unsung lives of continence and charity: indeed, being markedly reluctant to break into its serenity by speaking of it even at the urgent request of the abbas. Eucharistichos 'the Secular' merits a place in the Alphabetical Collection specifically for this achievement, which places him above the two abbas who were sent to him by God for instruction. Besides dividing anything in the way of profit from their small flock of sheep into three equal portions, for the poor, for hospitality and for personal needs, 'since I married my wife, we have not had intercourse with each other, for she is a virgin; we each live alone. At night we wear hair-shirts and our ordinary clothes by day. No-one has known of this till now.' Amoun and his wife were of this number for eighteen years before his ultimate retreat into the desert; initially she resisted complete separation but finally it came at her own suggestion.

> The prayers of Amoun prevailed and she said to him at last..."It is just that we should live apart - you being a man and practising righteousness, and I also eagerly following the same way as you. For it is absurd that you should live with me in chastity and yet conceal such virtue as this of yours." But he, thanking God, said to her: "Then you keep this house; but I will make myself another house." And he went out and settled in the inner part of the mount of Nitria... He used to see that blessed lady his wife twice each year.

Some seculars opted for this position later on in their married lives:

either taking longer to arrive at the motivation, or to fulfil familial or local obligations first. Paphnutius was directed to visit the headman of a neighbouring village, who had given up conjugal relations after begetting three sons to help him: 'It is now 30 years since I separated from my wife. I slept with her for only three years and had three sons by her.' He also practised hospitality and charity and was conspicuous for his upright judgements. [42]

Of perhaps more interest, because less subject to formulaic utterances, however, are the cases of those who absorbed the prevalent attitudes to the extent of attempting the 'second degree of chastity' but whose faith - or instruction - was found to be lacking in some vital respect. Augustine writes to a matrona, Ecdicia, who took it upon herself to attempt to impose continence on her unwilling husband; Jerome writes to a husband, Rusticus, in what, reading between the lines, was probably a similar case. Their attitudes differ as one might expect from these two: Jerome wrings his hands over Rusticus and begs him to reconsider and repent. He has been applied to by Rusticus' wife, Artemisia, 'now no longer your wife but your sister and fellow-servant' to intercede and turn Rusticus again to virtue, a task after Jerome's heart. Rusticus and Artemisia had taken a vow to live apart, to 'give themselves to prayer', but apparently, his will had not been equal to hers in the matter and he 'gave way altogether' while she stood firm. Rusticus had subsequently, when they were about to be separated by a threat of barbarian invasion, vowed an oath that if Artemisia made her way to the Holy Land, he would follow her there and do penance; but he had not carried this out, which is the occasion for Jerome's intercession. Jerome accepts Artemisia's view of the affair and abjures Rusticus to fulfil his vow and 'imitate her whose teacher you ought to have been. For shame! The weaker vessel overcomes the world and yet the stronger is overcome by it!' [43]

Certainly, this is an area in which women seem to have little difficulty in becoming the stronger vessel: contrary to the experience of the desert, in Western aristocratic examples we know of it seems to be more the rule for the wife to take the initiative. Aline Rousselle speculates that Therasia may have been the motivator towards continence with Paulinus; certainly Ausonius referred to her as Tanaquil - the name of Tarquin's wife who persuaded him to leave his native town and take Rome.

Of these cases that we have in detail, the case of Ecdicia and her (unnamed) husband directly echoes that of Artemisia and Rusticus. Augustine's response, however, is signally different, and considerably more developed. The impulse towards continence was Ecdicia's; her husband was apparently reluctantly persuaded, and subsequently purchased consolation elsewhere. At the time of applying to Augustine, they seem to have been living apart and Ecdicia was denying her husband access to their son. Augustine takes a firm line: far from admonishing her husband for backsliding, he takes the stance that the rupture - and the sin - are wholly Ecdicia's fault, and something for which she must express a proper repentance.

> I am extremely grieved that you decided to behave towards your husband in such a way that the edifice of continence, which had begun to be raised in him, should have sunk into the wretched ruin of adultery by his slipping from perseverance... This great evil occurred when you did not treat him with the moderation you ought, considering his state of mind... I know you undertook the continent state when he had not yet given his assent, and such an undertaking is not in accordance with sober teaching. For he ought not to have been cheated of the debt of your body before your wills were joined in that good that surpasses marital chastity...even if he had wanted to be continent and you had not, he would have been compelled to pay you the marital debt. God would have imputed continence to him if he, taking account of your weakness, not his own, did not deny you marital intercourse, lest you fall into the damnable sin of adultery. How much more suitable it would have been for you, to whom subjection is more proper, to comply with his wish in paying the debt in this way...so that your husband did not perish?

This is a theme Augustine felt needed reinforcing: the view of women

such as Ecdicia may have been provoked by, and certainly found justification in contentious ideas put around by Pollentius, with whom Augustine took issue in De Adulterinis Conjugiis, that 'the separation of spouses is admissible not only when there has been adultery on the part of one of the partners, but also where there is incompatibility or if rejection of the conjugal act makes it too difficult to live together'. In addition to conjugal disobedience, however, Ecdicia had still further provoked her husband by unilaterally making the decision for other observances of asceticism, to wit giving away property and money and wearing mean attire. The whole alien scenario must have influenced her husband's fall from grace, and Augustine roundly rebukes her for the whole: since her husband had conceded in the most important matter of chastity, she should not have further provoked him. 'You ought to have yielded to him in your domestic association with great humility and obedience, since he had so scrupulously conceded to you in an important matter... You ought to have consulted with your husband, who was a believer.' [44]

The contrast with Jerome could not be more striking. There is none of the predictable breast-beating over the more obvious sinner, he who has committed fornication and adultery: the sin is at the feet of the person who occasioned it, however overtly blameless otherwise. This is interesting in the light of the admiring way in which John Cassian tells us of Abba Theonas' complete disregard of the same reasoning, used on him by his wife. When he proposed a life of continence to his wife, she refused it, arguing that 'in the flower of her youth she could not do without her husband. If, as a result of his abandoning her, she fell into bad ways, it would be his fault for breaking his marriage vows'. Hearing this, he considered her a seductress and himself quite justified in leaving her. Paphnutius also encouraged a former disciple, who had left the coenobium to marry, to desert his wife in order to return to

righteousness. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the difference in treatment is due to the sex of the person attempting to impose continency in each case. For Augustine, however, Ecdicia, as a wife and as a believer, even though in this she felt him to be in the wrong, should have demonstrated proper subjection to her husband: but even if the case had been the other way round, Augustine is careful to emphasize that in this practice, the decision must be equally arrived at by both partners, or not take place at all. John Chrysostom was similarly obliged to preach conjugal duty to wives whom he considered 'responsible for their husbands' misdemeanours' and reproved spouses who had adopted continence without the agreement of their partners. He also concludes that 'the result of this is adultery, fornication and domestic strife' - and yet 'many women do this'. For Augustine and Chrysostom, at least, the equality incumbent in this crucial decision arises logically out of patristic theology: neither partner must backslide, hence both must be fit for it, and consent. Better that both remain in the lower degree of virtue than that one achieve the heights while the other slide to destruction - but the stress they place on this, and the hectoring tone they assume may be the result of being faced with applying it in these cases to petticoat rebellion. In practice, as Rusticus and Theonas' wife found, the decision lay with the more dominant partner - and even if imposed on a reluctant spouse, in both these cases there are those who will praise it. [45]

Augustine returned to the theme in his letter to Boniface, Count of Africa, expressing disillusionment at the gap between his expressions of intent and his actions. After the death of his first wife, a devout Catholic, and a line of communication between Augustine and the Count, Boniface had vowed to remain chaste; but, falling out of Augustine's orbit, his determination had dropped away and he had remarried, and to add insult to injury, the new wife was an Arian. Augustine, seeing his

influential protege drifting inexorably away from him, sent him one last, rather forlorn letter of admonishment: since he has sinned in vowing chastity and remarrying, he should, if possible, persuade his wife to agree to a vow of continence, that what was vowed to God might be rightfully returned to Him. However, 'I am prevented from exhorting you to that mode of life by your having a wife, since without her consent it is not lawful for you to live under a vow of continence' - and this despite the wife's being a despised heretic. The aspect of the importance of individual choice, even for married women, and girls in tutela who are not accustomed to exercise it, in Western eyes is more important than ever before. [46]

The Christian Matrona in interaction with the next generation

The exercise of greater influence in their marital relations must have been of no small importance to those Christian wives who did have children. Because of their position in Roman law, as essentially outside their husband's family, constituting in some sort their own individual family unit; and because of the comprehensive nature of patria potestas, Roman women were at a considerable legal disadvantage in their relations with their children. Jane Gardner has rightly pointed out that where patria potestas included custody of and disciplinary powers over the child concerned, ownership of the child's property and ultimate right of decision on education, marriage and domicile of the child, and where in the case of disagreements between the parents concerning the child's welfare the mother's wishes carried no legal weight, the extent of the mother's influence on the child was decided by her relationship with her husband. [47] In this respect, as we have seen, Christian wives were beginning to have some advantage over their pagan counterparts. It remains to be seen to what extent they used their increasing centrality in the specifically Christian perception of the family to influence their children according to the

lights of their piety; and in what other respects their relations with their children differed from their counterparts of a century or two earlier, and what different trends in maternal thought we can see that are specifically Christian in origin.

In some quite surprising cases, there is little obvious change: some show signs of regarding their Christian obligations - however pressing on them for personal sacrifice - as being apart from their family obligations. Matronae such as Paula and Albina, conspicuous for personal devotion, ultimately to the extent of extreme ascetic observance, yet produced sons, Toxotius and Volusianus, who grew up in impeccable paganism in the best tradition of their gens. Further, the behaviour of Blesilla immediately after her widowhood suggests a certain amount of licence from the influence of her austere mother, before illness led her into a revision of her lifestyle. This may again say more about the altogether different level of pressures on women in the capital, and out of the top drawer of society. Nevertheless, Toxotius and Volusianus are subject to indirect pressure arriving because of their mothers: both are targetted by their mothers' respective mentors, Jerome and Augustine, using the personal connection to try for an illustrious conversion, with or without the connivence of their mothers we do not know. All that is certain is that these women left behind sons in the traditional mode, implying either that the pious woman's influence failed, perhaps in the case of her husband, perhaps of her son; or that she, as well as they, still saw other concerns as preeminent in the case of those who were to carry on the gens.

Others show indications that a certainty in moral direction is not backed up by certainty in practical application. For it is clear that for some, the duties of the Roman family no longer started and ended with the gens; that one of the maternal duties was now perceived to be an inculcation of the sense of obligations owing to the next world: but

that there was confusion over how far this meant rejecting the paraphernalia of the present one. Further, this ambiguity was being transmitted to the next generation, through uncertainty over the precepts to be followed in their training. The signals that Augustine received as a child were evidently confusing to the growing boy: while his mother clearly wished him to be in good standing in the eyes of the church, she was still ambitious for his future. She, as well as Patricius, was full of the need for a good classical education for her boy, though in her case Augustine does attribute her with the thought that it would help him towards God. Nonetheless, he blamed them equally for something that he sees as a retarding factor in his journey towards God: because 'both my parents were unduly eager for me to learn', the young Augustine imbibed what he later regarded as the wrong priorities - 'their only concern was that I should learn how to make a good speech and persuade others by my words'. It is not the usefulness of this training that Augustine is querying - it would stand him in good stead in later life - but the emphasis placed on it as an end in itself, even by the mother who 'did all she could to see that you, my God, should be a father to me', and by whom in this respect he feels the more let down. For how could she, he bitterly asks, attach value to 'a training which taught me to have a horror of faulty grammar', in which 'a man...gives greater scandal if he breaks the rules of pronunciation by dropping the aitch from 'human being' than if he breaks Your rules and hates another human being'? As a catechumen 'I had been told of the eternal life promised to us by Our Lord, who humbled himself and came down amongst us proud sinners'; as a schoolboy 'the traditional education taught me that Jupiter punishes the wicked with his thunderbolts and yet commits adultery himself'. He agrees the necessity of learning one's letters but deplores the use made of them: 'the words...are like choice and costly glasses, but they contain the wine of error', and 'if we refused to drink, we were beaten for it'; something he regards as culpable, 'the

mistaken ideas of those who insisted on making me study', particularly in Monica. He implies, in short, that while she was weeping, praying, and seeking out the advice of bishops on his behalf, her respect for the old-style notions of education was acting against her own ends: the young Augustine's ready intellect had quickly absorbed the lesson that to tell a lie more eloquently than the next boy was to gain more merit than to tell the truth - a hard lesson to unlearn. The upright servant of God she may have been, but more than once in the Confessions we get a strong sense from her son that Monica's years of tears for Augustine, that he calls the 'legacy of Eve' were of her own making. [48]

This is an ambivalence perceived by others, evidently. Jerome's cry of 'Non Christianus sum, sed Ciceronianus' is a protest against the unconscious assumptions that were received with a traditional pagan education: of ultimately putting the training in which they figure to use in the secular, self-concerned world it had evolved to serve. This motivation the young Augustine assimilated readily, too readily for at least one of the parents who had anxiously pushed him in the way of it; small wonder he complained of confused signals.

Gregory of Nazianzus was also much concerned over the tension between Christian belief and classical culture; it is an issue that he considers much in his writings, though from a more apologetic standpoint than Augustine. It is something he treats of in his works on his family; but as usual in the intimate sphere, he is anxious to gloss over something identified in advance as an issue of concern. Nonna, just as she never touched the person of any heathen women, would have no truck with 'Grecian tales or theatrical songs, on the ground that what is unholy is unbecoming to holy things'; but Gregory is less stridently honest than Augustine about his own training and conflict of interests. If Nonna held this view so absolutely, and if she had had the influence in the household that Gregory represents her as having, the corollary

would logically be that her children would be educated away from the contamination of pagan cultural notions; but there is little in the outline of Gregory's education and aspirations to suggest that she held this view in fact. His tutor, Carterius, subsequently became a monk, which suggests an early pedagogic influence more in harmony with maternal precepts than was to be found in Augustine's small town schoolmasters: but in his subsequent career at Athens, and in his rhetorical aspirations Gregory was simply following the common run of classical education, though his autobiographical writings highlight his youthful struggle between the life of the rhetorician and the life of the Christian contemplative. Ultimately, though he had taught rhetoric briefly, as had his friend and fellow-student at Athens, Basil of Caesarea, he came to consider the rhetorician's art incompatible with a serious Christian vocation; but still his writings, in the structure of his language, his stylistic devices and his development of ideas, indicate that he was thoroughly imbued with contemporary sophistic culture. 'Rhetoric formed his education, moulded his literary style, and gave him oratorical tools to fight his enemies, praise his friends, and enhance his daily correspondence.' [49] Later on, however, he experienced the need to justify his style of education and his preference for the classical philosophy and poetry against the attacks of more stringent Christian critics; and though his attitude is less condemnatory of the materials of the classical education than Augustine, it is at best ambivalent about the effect of pagan culture on Christian youth. [50]

In this respect, matronae of the Christian families set a limit to their increased influence in the family circle. In the higher echelons, their sons seem to be, wholly or partly, exempt from any proselytizing notions of their mothers, as the daughters were not: Paula and Albina brought up pagan sons. Where they do succeed in drawing their sons away

from the preferred religion of the paternal gens, this influencing confines itself entirely to the personal sphere, the immediate concern of the soul's well-being: they seem not to have recognized - or at least not tried to redress - the polarity between the domestic and the didactic conditioning. Monica strove for the Christianity of her son, and yet wished him permeated with a "good grounding in the classics", as was proper for a middle-class provincial lad with his way in the world to make. Nonna's ostentatious eschewing of pagan culture probably was entirely personal, as was proper for the women of the newly conscious Christian households: even the most spiritual of them seem to have had few notions of directing the training of their sons into paths more in keeping with Christian cultural notions. Hence the dilemma perceived by Augustine, Jerome and Gregory, of the actual pain and shame afforded them in finding their holy writings, of such immense spiritual value, couched in such basic and primitive language; of seeing them derided by educated pagans, and experiencing a sneaking sense of communion with this derision, as their own education had trained them to do; and of a guilty preference for reading Cicero and Virgil - and furtively reproducing their 'hall-marked, marmoreal phrases' in writings devoted to Christian ends; for these were the tags and allusions which denoted an educated man the length and breadth of the civilised world.

But if not attaching enough significance to the cultural conditioning of their offspring, these mothers still express notions which would seem dangerously anti-familial to opinions informed by mos maiorum: in the personal, if not the educational sphere, the idea of 'putting God before the children' becomes a well-aired patristic notion. Melania the Elder and Paula are excellent cases in point. Though they left behind fairly careful provision for their deserted offspring - and Jerome in particular is capable of exaggerating the impulsive haste of their flights from their world, such as to imply that they did not even

take this much thought for their families - they did not in the least consider themselves obliged to be held back by them. In this respect, Jerome's narrative with regard to Paula touches on, and vaunts, exactly those aspects - of the duty of the Christian negating that of the mother - that would be seized on for their shock value by opponents. Her own personal devoutness notwithstanding, Paula was neglecting her maternal obligations in not staying to see Toxotius into maturity and Rufina into marriage as reportedly they begged her with tears to do; nor was taking the youthful Eustochium with her considered a palliating factor by those of such opinions as Praetextata, who thought the little girl ought to have been offered at least the chance of seeing the kind of life girls of her station were normally leading. Gregory of Nazianzus also attributed the notion of 'God before the children', with the customary lavish praise, to his own mother, that model for Christian matronae. For once, the wife is presented as being at one with her spouse on this point: 'Lovers of their children and of Christ as they both were, what is most extraordinary, they were far greater lovers of Christ than of their children' says Gregory fondly, 'their one measure of blessedness in their children was their virtue and close association with the chief Good.' Monica, though never presented as espousing this view, when pushed exhibits it in practice in forbidding Augustine her house while he is a practising Manichee. [51]

Not that all Christian matronae saw such extremes as the proper end of Christian motherhood: many perfectly devout matrons were neither committed to absolutism themselves nor consenting to such extrema duris on the part of their children. Albina, mother of Melania the Younger, though herself 'saintly' by Gerontius' standards, presents the case for moderate and bewildered, if devout, Christian parenthood. Though accompanying Melania in her chosen lifestyle, Albina frequently disagreed with her daughter on the practicalities of its observance,

particularly as to fasting and hours of prayer and labour, and was genuinely tormented by the spectacle of the extremes of self-immolation Melania put herself through.

> Embracing her, her mother would say, crying bitterly, "I have faith that I too share your sufferings, my daughter; for if the mother of the seven Maccabees possessed with them eternal joy for having witnessed the torments of her sons in a single hour, how much more will it not be granted to me, who every day suffer more torments than she seeing you thus wasting away without granting yourself any respite in such labours.

Though devout herself, she did not find such extremes fitting or necessary.

There are also various examples among the desert coenobites of mothers of a similarly uncomprehending frame of mind being represented as crosses for monks to bear. The renowned ascetic, Mark, had a non-consenting mother who went to his cell and pestered his abba, Sylvanus, that she might be able to see him, against Mark's will. In this case, Sylvanus is represented as entertaining her wish patiently, directing Mark to let his mother see him, and comforting her when she achieved her wish at small consolation to herself: when Mark arrived he closed his eyes so as not to see her while greeting her, and she did not recognize him, so very thin and dirty was he, thinking him just an attendant. At a second request, Mark refused pointblank to see his mother and Sylvanus sent her away. The mother of Poemen, who had lost all seven of her sons to asceticism, was similarly reluctant to just let her boys go; but met with even harsher treatment. They shut the door in her face when she went to see them, and would not open it for all her crying, abjuring her to content herself with the prospect of seeing them in the next world. John Chrysostom's mother, Anthusa, also fell a victim to the idea of the family as millstone: a sufficiently devoted mother - and <u>univira</u> - to attract the admiring attention of his pagan teacher Libanius, she rated him, and family life, above God in her order of priorities when she begged him not to leave her and enter the

monastic life. Attributing to her the chief motive of fear of being a lone widow, he warned sternly about the legacy of Eve, and properly ignored her feminine weakness. [52]

This polarisation of standpoints, traditional and Christian-ascetic relative to the matrona's obligations towards her children was still more positively demarcated, and nowhere more vexed than when it came to the issue of property: an issue fundamental equally to the familia system and to the new teaching. As a legal unit and as a social entity the familia was defined by its property, and all the individuals in it were hedged in by obligations thereto. Now devout men and women of standing were being asked to consider - and act upon - the idea that their property was not theirs or their family's, but in trust for Christ and his needy people, with far heavier obligations of civic relief and largitio than when it was merely believed to be held for the family and future generations. Christian parents were, if they took the teaching literally, called upon to beggar the seed of their loins in this world on the promise of a requital in the next; to give up their children's material security as a species of down payment on their heavenly mortgage - a new and interesting twist to concepts of parental duty and safeguarding the interests of the familia. Of course, opinion could vary as to methods of doing this, amongst which making the bulk over to the Church to dispose of did not always rank highly: many elected to interpret this teaching in the manner of keeping their wealth under their own hand - the better to dispense their charity in a fitting way, as did Juliana, Albina, mother of Melania, and Pammachius, and many another.

In this spirit then, some notable cases of mothers advertised as setting out to 'impoverish' their descendants should be taken with a pinch of salt: Jerome frequently makes this claim on behalf of his female followers, with dubious reliability. Paula, for instance, is

depicted as expressing the ascetic orthodoxy on this issue when he says of her 'so lavish was her charity that she robbed her children; and when her relatives remonstrated with her for so doing, she declared she was leaving them to a better inheritance in the mercy of Christ'. Similarly, of Albina, mother of Marcella, Jerome claims 'so obedient was [Marcella] to her mother that she acted against her own personal wishes. For Albina for some time made ready to neglect her own offspring and desired to alienate all her property from her own children and grandchildren to confer it on her brother's children'. In fact, as Jill Harries has pointed out, both Paula and Albina, though dispossessing themselves - and that of only part of their wealth, retaining sufficient to set up monasteries in their new lives - were still observing conventional methods of property transfer. For Paula evidently had not succeeded in robbing her children entirely as Jerome says in the next chapter that 'before setting out, she gave them all that she had', only 'disinheriting herself upon earth that she might find an inheritance in heaven'. Jerome may be misleading also in implying that she had deprived herself of the vast mass of the family estate, for a widow was dependent on her husband's generosity in his will for her property: if he died intestate, she ranked after her children according to the laws of inheritance. Albina similarly was merely abiding by the principles of intestate succession, since with no certain descendants apart from Marcella who was refusing to remarry, her brother's children would be the heirs, as agnates. Melania the Elder, another great example to Christian matronae, scrupulously upheld family priorities when she 'surrendered all she possessed' to 'her only son' Valerius Publicola. Emmelia, mother of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Macrina (and four others) is another case in point of the mother who observes ascetic self-abnegation while preserving the family's precedence of consideration: in this case, influenced and prompted by her offspring rather than drawing them willy-nilly after her. Thus instigated most

notably by Macrina, says Gregory of Nyssa, who 'weaned her off luxury into equality' to give up 'all showy styles of living and the services of domestics...and to share the life of the maids' till 'poverty was their wealth', she divested herself of what does seem to have been her hold on the family wealth: 'the property - a frequent cause of worldliness - she divided between the children' though Macrina 'kept nothing of the things from the equal division...but all her share was put into the priest's hands by divine command.' Like Marcella, Macrina would have no direct descendants, so her perception of her obligations was different. [53]

What is more surprising is how many did seem to want to fulfil this teaching, or who wished to be accorded the fame of doing so, given that it was so subversive to received ideas of what was due to the familia. Most interesting of all are those such as Nonna who are accorded every intention of pauperising their progeny by the very children in question, and with approbation, not reproach:

> unable to satisfy her zeal for benevolence, she not only considered all the property which [she and Gregory] possessed and which accrued to them later as unable to suffice her own longing, but she would, as I have often heard her say, have gladly sold herself into slavery, had there been any means of doing so, to expend the proceeds upon the poor. Thus entirely did she give rein to her generosity.

Gorgonia, too, is accredited with following her mother's example: she 'opened her house to the Godly' and 'helped the needy' to the extent that 'she left nothing behind to earth save her body. She bartered everything for the hopes above: the sole wealth she left to her children was the imitation of her example and emulation of her merits'. This has a fine ring to it, and sounds like a genuine case of 'Christ before the children' - up to a point. Gorgonia predeceased her husband; and since Gregory nowhere says of her, unlike Nonna, that she was in complete control of her household finances, the farthest extent of her liberality in this case would have been to have expended her dowry and

personal money upon worthy causes. The children would still have received their father's estate. Nor is there any concrete evidence in fact that Nonna seriously imperilled the material well-being of her children in actuality: though she and Gregory the Elder 'rivalled each other' 'in considering their wealth to be communal to all and in liberality in bestowing it', when he 'entrusted the greater part of this bounty to her hand', it was 'as being a most excellent and trusty steward of such matters', implying a certain carefulness and forethought, not to say husbanding of resources in the bestowing of their charity rather than a headlong spree of abandoning wealth. Gregory does not seem to have been left destitute; nor does he say of either of his parents even as much as he says of Gorgonia of their depriving their children. Yet he considers it commendable to stress their charitableness in terms which imply a dereliction of family dues which would have been deeply disturbing to some of his readers. [54]

A more genuine example of this is found in the actions of Melania and Pinianus. This young couple are seemingly unique in our sources for the extreme nature of their charity and their absolute observance of the commandment to 'sell all that you have and give to the poor' - 'all' in this case being one of the largest aristocratic fortunes of the time. And far from praising their actions, their family did their utmost to prevent them. But again, hazarding the security of their lineage is not really an issue: Melania and Pinianus had no children, having had one daughter who died in infancy, and one miscarriage; she was her father, Valerius Publicola's only child, and he had no brothers to whom would go testamentary precedence. When they first married, Pinianus had expressed perfectly proper notions concerning the transfer of their wealth: when Melania, ever the more energetic Christian of the two, tried to talk him into a continent marriage, he replied sturdily, 'as soon as, by the will of God, we have two children to inherit our

possessions, then together we will both renounce the world'. But given their unhappy experiences in trying to encompass this, it is not altogether surprising that Pinianus was finally convinced that this was not what God intended for them; following Melania's miscarriage, she was so ill that her life was despaired of, and Pinianus promised continence against her recovery. In this instance, his perceptions of the expectations of the family, as advanced by the traditional outlook of Publicola, were outweighed by hers, as advanced by the formidable exponent of the new sanctity, Melania the Elder: Melania the Younger and Pinianus, two scions of noble Christian houses, were caught in a straight clash of ideologies between authoritative elders over the correct conception of Christian aristocratic family duty. For Melania as for Pinianus, family pride and glory were not negligible - she maintained a high profile in her later charitable and ascetic works - but she was playing with a different set of goal-posts. Family glory could, and should, be obtained through alternative means than procreation and property rights.

The consequences of this distinguished victory for extremism were far more wide-ranging than they had been for Melania the Elder, or her relatives Paulinus and Therasia in similar circumstances. Melania the Younger and Pinianus made their gesture at a more desperate time in Rome's history; and in them had been vested far more concentrated family hopes for precisely the continuity that they rejected. Publicola threatened them with disinheritance - a fairly redundant threat, given his lack of any other direct relatives to whom to leave the property, and a measure against which Melania might successfully have appealed in any case because of her entitlement, as <u>suus heres</u> to Publicola, to a quarter of the estate. Severus, Pinianus' brother, seems to have been equally aghast at their plans, not least because, in view of Pinianus' renunciation of his conjugal rights, he had the best claim on the estate

in the case of intestate succession, and should, by convention, have been offered first refusal by the young couple in their disposal of their estate. Instigated by him, says Gerontius (and he himself instigated by the devil), the slaves on one of Pinianus' properties rebelled against being sold: 'Severus...persuaded their slaves to say, "No, we will not be sold; but if we are forced to the point when we are sold, your brother Severus is our master and he himself shall buy us."' The embattled couple appealed for support to Serena (whom they had previously declined to meet), the wife of the chief minister Stilicho. They succeeded in obtaining her help, resulting in the speeding-up of the sale of their extensive estates in the provinces; only to find themselves, just as they were trying to leave the city, at odds with the Prefect of the City, Gabinius Barbarus Pompeianus, 'a man of strong pagan convictions, resolved in concert with the whole Senate that their goods should be vindicated to the public treasury'. It is revealing that the biographer concedes that Pompeianus had the support of the whole (predominantly Christian) Senate in this enterprise: Jill Harries has surmised that Melania and Pinianus' schemes can have had little to recommend them to 'moderate Christians in the Senate, as Publicola had been, who combined Christian belief with a tenacious adherence to the rights of property'. In addition there was a financial crisis in the city, brought on by the need to find money to buy off the barbarians; and the couple's supporter, Serena, had just been executed at the order of the Senate for suspected treason. However, Pompeianus did not live to put the issue to the test: while performing the duties of his office he was caught up in rioting following a bread shortage and 'by the providence of God' says Gerontius, 'he was maltreated and lynched in the heart of the city'. The Senate did not pursue his measure, and Melania and Pinianus achieved the tactical coup of ridding themselves of the majority of their property just before the bottom dropped out of the market with Alaric's invasion of Italy in 408. They retained their own

disposition of their wealth, feeding the poor, ransoming prisoners and endowing African churches - to the extent of finding themselves forcibly detained at Hippo, much to Augustine's embarrassment, by parishioners who hoped to stave off their own incipient crisis by the expected largesse of their aristocratic visitors. Despite Augustine's version, that his flock were moved rather by Pinianus' evident piety than by his equally evident material resources, it is not hard to read their hopes that if he became a priest in their diocese, their church would have first claim on the disposition of his property. Melania and Pinianus' devotion to Augustine and his ends went only so far: although placing piety above family in liquidating their assets for charitable purposes, they did not interpret it as being filtered through the approval of the prelates of Mother Church. Though lavish with their resources, they retained their own personal interest in them. [55]

Paula, too, does fall into the category of those placing piety above family, despite, as we have seen, leaving dependents in Rome catered for. One of her offspring she genuinely did not only deprive but in fact impoverish: her daughter Eustochium, and this as a result of charitable self-deprivation, in which motive Eustochium was expected to participate, when 'she left those dependent on her poor, but not so poor as she was herself'. This, interestingly, is after her charitable impulses have gone beyond even her teacher Jerome's ideas of what is good: 'so anxious was she to turn no needy person away that she borrowed money at interest and often contracted new loans to pay off old ones' at which 'I reproved her... I wished her to be more careful in managing her concerns'. But 'she overruled me' and 'she obtained her wish at last and died leaving her daughter overwhelmed with a mass of debt. This Eustochium still owes and indeed cannot hope to pay off by her own exertions; only the mercy of Christ can free her from it'. Jerome presents this sobering statement in the context of a panegyric.

and, understandably reluctant to backtrack on his previous sentiments on the right disposition of property, finds in it matter to commend - 'her faith was greater' than his - but he has evidently had a shock at how far his encomia have been taken in practice; it is a moot point whether vexation or approbation is the stronger feeling in this passage. Certainly the 'most pious' Nonna, who was accredited with more absolutely expressed intentions of doing so, had no thought to 'give rein to her generosity' as 'entirely' as this.

One other case is given of a woman obeying the behest to impoverish oneself absolutely for God, and a sobering one at that: Paesia, an heiress from near Scetis who 'exhausted her resources till she began to be in want' because she 'made her house a hospice for the use of the fathers of Scetis'. Far from being morally supported by them in this course, as Paula was by Jerome and others, it was not until she had taken up prostitution to support herself that they again interested themselves in her, and then to reproach her for her descent from her former 'blessed', exploited status. John the Dwarf drew her out of her evil life only in time for her to die penitent. [56]

Paesia was suffered to behave so because she was a woman on her own. Paula was suffered to behave so because she was effectively a woman on her own, her family provided for, ruining the prospects only of another woman on her own. Melania was suffered to behave so because she won Pinianus' backing and had no progeny with prospects to ruin. Contrast their treatment in the hands of our writers with that of Ecdicia, who won sharp criticism from Augustine for attempting unilaterally to initiate this state of abnegation, with a present and unwilling husband and an infant son.

> You ought to have yielded to him in your domestic association with great humility and obedience, since he had so scrupulously conceded to you in an important matter... Therefore you ought not to have given away your clothes, or your gold or silver, or any money, or any of your earthly

> belongings, without his decision... Furthermore, you ought to have consulted with your husband, who was a believer...concerning your plan for giving alms and devoting your possessions to the poor' and '...there is a certain matronly attire geared to the person's station, distinct from widows' clothing and appropriate for married women who are believers, an attire that preserves religious respect. If your husband did not want you to discard this type of clothing, did not want you to display yourself as a widow while he was still living, I think he should not have been led to the point of a scandalous quarrel with you about this matter.

Discarding the trappings - and disregarding the consent - of the world, as represented by one's family, was not, in fact, such a personal decision as the Fathers often represented it. Ecdicia might well have been following a diet of Jerome's advice from what we can glean of her actions; it brought her short shrift from Augustine. The commandment to 'sell what you have', though more central to Christian doctrine than the vexed question of celibacy, should still not be undertaken by the matrona without the actively participating consent of her spouse. Nonna is exalted: Ecdicia is rebuked. Not lightly was it said 'those with husbands cannot so pray': and yet Gregory of Nazianzus could maintain that women with husbands could and did so pray. The matter was less straight-forward; women with unwilling husbands found that they could not so pray. Ecdicia was a step away from being regarded as an Amanda. one who led her husband forward, who did not make her husband 'effeminate' in his worship; by Augustine's argument, he must have made her 'effeminate', then, but the blame attaches to her - as it did not to Artemisia, or to Melania, in similar circumstances. [57]

Some Conclusions - the Christian Matrona working with and against the grain

Some of the more notable of our Christian women, then, as we have seen, become highly regarded by setting their influence to work within the system, for and on behalf of the family nucleus. We have evidence of a number of formidable Christian matrons who are stiff with family

loyalty and put their piety to work in its behalf. Albina, Proba and Juliana are examples of matronae whose outlook is not perceptibly much different from what might have been projected for them a century earlier. They embrace the traditionally admired stance of the univira; they admire and write elegant letters on Duty and the Soul to the fashionable thinkers of their day and dabble in approved intellectual pursuits; in escape from an unfortunate political situation they travel to visit friends, relatives, and places admired by their peers. So doing they are lauded as venerable widows, as devout seekers after Christian guidance, as pilgrims. Proportionate to their wealth, they are not even outstandingly charitable - these women well understood family tenacity over property. Proba was 'the heiress of a vast agricultural empire, acquired by rapine and maintained with a selfishness that had aggravated the miseries and resentments of the Gothic disaster'. Augustine's exaggerated respect for them nowhere reflects this. He can only say feebly to Proba 'though you are very wealthy, pray as a poor person' and instructs her to 'account yourself desolate in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be' and assure Juliana that 'no one can judge you'. Their devotion is tepid compared with the example of either Melania, both of whom he knew, or even with that of his mother; he still addresses them in glowing terms. 'Venerable handmaid of God' to Albina, 'devoted handmaid of God' to Proba; and this despite the readiness with which they put him in his place. Albina had obviously taken him firmly - if indirectly - to task for allowing her family to be coerced by his disorderly flock to the discomfiture of Pinianus at Thagaste: 'We must not be indignant against you as you are against the people of Hippo' says Augustine with injured dignity and a sting of reproach that 'you, saints of God, have believed these things about us' and thanks her sardonically because 'from humility and modesty you did not presume to correct a bishop, but left it to be discovered by indirect inferences.' Obviously her strictures

had found their mark - he is humiliated and defensive in his letter to Alypius, and bitter that she had been vilifying his name around the neighbourhood. Juliana, too, 'will put these fussy provincial bishops firmly in their place': she assures Augustine top-loftily that though she thanks him for his care in warning her and her family against heretical thinkers, 'your Reverence knows that I and my household are entirely separated from persons of this description; and all our family follow so strictly the catholic faith as never at any time to have wandered from it or fallen into any heresy', even 'the most trivial'. Augustine replies in a nettled tone that he felt it incumbent upon him to write, since her family had been the targets of 'a certain book addressed to the holy Demetrias', her daughter, from the detested Pelagius, which it was not lawful for a virgin of Christ to read. Matrons like these, well-ensconced within the world and identifying strongly with family interests seem to concede little to current models for female sanctity as advanced by the Fathers: it is informative, then, to note the regard in which the Fathers hold them. [58]

We have a brief but illuminating cameo of another such in Jerome's Life of St. Hilarion: this is one Aristaenete, 'a woman well known among her people' as the wife of the upwardly-mobile Elpidius 'who later became Praetorian Prefect'. Aristaenete and Elpidius, with their three sons, were returning from fashionable pilgrimage to visit Anthony in seclusion, when her three children were struck down at Gaza with a 'semi-tertian ague'. When their lives were despaired of, she went to Hilarion who was living in the near-by desert, to beg him to come to Gaza and cure them; and despite his conspicuous reluctance, she will not take no for an answer:

> At first he refused and said that he never left his cell and was not accustomed to enter a house, much less the city; but she threw herself upon the ground and cried repeatedly, "Hilarion, servant of Christ, give me back my children". All present were weeping, and the saint himself wept as he denied her. What need to say more? The woman did not leave him

until he promised that he would enter Gaza after sunset.

Aristaenete is a good example of the matrona in our sources who achieves devotion to pious observance in conjunction with devotion to her ties in this world. Like Albina, Proba and Juliana, she had no idea of following Paula's model and abandoning the City and her family in her piety. Rather she made them accomplices in it: the World visiting the Desert - and on more than one occasion, as Jerome relates that she was on her way to visit Anthony again when Hilarion informed her by miraculous intuition of his fellow hermit's death. Hence when in need, she had no hesitation in calling upon the resources of the Desert to serve her World-based family: this pious matrona will move heaven and earth - and a recalcitrant hermit out of the desert, against his strong opposition - in their interests. Some, indeed, exercised their manipulative powers on behalf of clerics from inside a normal family circumstance: we do not, for instance, know anything out of the ordinary about the circumstances of Italica, to whom Augustine wrote with such exaggerated respect, canvassing her views in a theological debate, and who obviously had much respect and many contacts. It would be still more interesting if we knew for certain if, as seems likely, that this was the same Italica that John Chrysostom wrote to in 406, because she had the capacity to intervene with the Pope and possibly the Emperor at a crucial moment in his career. Not all outstanding examples of Christian wifedom felt impelled to either abandon or alter their family circumstances; some could manipulate their Christianity from inside a safely orthodox family environment. [59]

Others, in the name of serving the familia, prove to be in practice a remarkably adept Fifth Column in the interests of their beliefs. Monica, as we have seen, drew Patricius intractably away from his civic-based paganism. Laeta seems to have done the same for Toxotius' class-based paganism - and in so doing, was more successful than his

mother and sisters. Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about the process in his case; only that Jerome writes to Laeta commending her devotion in the face of resistance from her father, Publilius Caecina Albinus and 'his son-in-law...before he came to believe'. Nonna exercises similar traction on Gregory the Elder: though his beliefs may seem to have had more in common with hers, they were not seen as consonant with Catholic christianity, and Gregory the Younger stresses that for her 'he went out from his kindred and his home'; for she 'could not bear the separation from God' implied in his 'impurity'. Avita is accorded by Paulinus of Nola with being the motivating influence behind the conversion of her husband Apronianus and her daughter Eunomia to asceticism: a family Palladius notes as being 'all so desirous to please God that they were publicly converted to the life of continence and virtue and were held worthy on this account to fall asleep in Christ freed from all sin, having become possessed of knowledge and leaving their life in good remembrance' - the family that prays together stays together. [60]

It is a pattern one finds over and over again; sometimes in unlikely quarters. Fritigil, 'a certain queen of the Marcomanni' came under Ambrose's influence, according to Paulinus' Life, having heard of his fame from a Christian traveller; when she wrote to him 'asking that she be informed in his own writing as to what she ought to believe', he wrote back 'a most noteworthy letter in the form of a catechism' in which he urged her to use her influence 'to persuade her husband to entrust himself along with his people to the Romans' - headed, we may believe by Ambrose. Boniface we have seen being got at by Augustine through the agency of his eminently pious (and nameless) Catholic wife; and subsequently drawn from the fold again by his second, Arian wife. Volusianus was also rendered susceptible to approaches by Augustine because of his connections with his pious mother, Albina, and niece,

Melania. Gorgonia, too, exercised some kind of benign influence over her husband; in this case, unfortunately, it is impossible to tell of what kind, or what exactly was the state of his spiritual welfare since Gregory only says elliptically that when it came to her husband, Gorgonia was anxious not to 'leave behind her imperfect anything that was hers'. Obviously something was lacking since 'her husband's perfection was her one remaining desire'; happily for her, however, 'she did not fail even of this petition', as befitted her mother's daughter. Another possible case of this kind, even more interesting in its implications is that of Augustine and his concubine of 15 years. Peter Brown considers that 'throughout her partner's Manichaean enthusiams, Augustine's concubine may have remained a Catholic catechumen'. Certainly she was described as devout, and named their son 'Adeodatus', 'given by God', seemingly a popular name amongst Carthaginian Christians; and when sent away from him at the instance of Monica, she went back to Africa 'vowing never to know a man again' - a species of widow, just as she had been a species of matrona. Her influence, if this is so, must have complimented Monica's in these years; and if so, a common-law marriage imitating the real thing in more respects than Augustine allowed for. [61]

As far as the Christian community was concerned, these devout matrons were the vanguard of devotion, far more than Jerome's virgins, whose work was so nebulous and whose care Chrysostom advised was so draining. The motivated matronae did their best from within society; and a pretty formidable best it could be, as we have seen. Sometimes, indeed their drive for piety was simply over-whelming rather than reforming, as Artemisia and Ecdicia discovered, the latter receiving only dire rebukes from Augustine for her activity where he had found much to praise in Albina and Juliana's inertia. However, being noted for piety in a supportive peer-group could certainly silence a husband:

from being in historical terms a 'women's' religion, Christianity had become the dominant cult; but as throughout its history till then, it was something that men, Patricius, Toxotius, Gregory and so on, must learn from their women. They also put their talents to work in the interests of the next generation, producing an impressive array of saintly bishops who admitted that they owed their convictions to their mothers, aunts, sisters. Not that their progeny were necessarily conspicuously grateful for this privileged upbringing; some of their judgements on these determined matrons indicate wariness of their influence and a distrust of petticoat government perhaps passed on from their fathers. Augustine writes wearily to another young man oppressed by a mother: 'What is the difference? Whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve (the temptress) that we must beware of in any woman' and even writes of Monica's love for him (referred to as cupiditate, with its overtones of avarice) as being 'a scourge of sorrow for her just punishment' - for 'she inherited the legacy of Eve.' John Chrysostom also regarded his mother Anthusa as a potential source of worldly woes and considered the necessity to 'flee from [her] as an enemy'; ultimately revealing only 'we live apart and have never quarrelled'. This is an attitude reflected by Poemen and Mark in their harsh dealings with their mothers' importunings: and in the scrupulosity of an anonymous monk who, we are told, accompanying his mother on a journey carried her across the river solicitously, but would not suffer his hands to touch her but wrapped them in his cloak before picking her up, because, even if his mother, 'the body of a woman is fire, and even from my touching you came the memory of other women into my soul'. But perhaps the ultimate example of the cleric dogged into salvation by (and despite) an importuning mother is from the anonymous series of Apophthegmata, which relates the tale of a young man who wanted to be a monk, but whose mother for a long time held him close to her, resisting his arguments; he stuck to his guns, however, saying 'I

want to save my soul' and ultimately 'she could not prevent him going'. Having gone, he became negligent of his observances; until, when ill, he had a vision that he beheld the place of judgement and his mother there awaiting judgement and she said 'Have you been condemned to this place too? What about that phrase you used to use - "I want to save my soul"?' Recovering, he made haste to repair his deficiencies, saying 'If I cannot endure my mother's reproach, how shall I endure on the day of judgement?' [62]

Not all married women, in sum, were buying themselves a master with their dowries: many of the Christian ones of our survey were using their position to direct morals, and redirect career choices and life-choices; operating within the environs of full marriage, or from a position of denying its worldly side; even, as in the case of Augustine's concubine, from a curious state of pseudo-marriage. Their influence was abiding: in the latent witness of their alterations of their husbands and children; in the overt witness of the tombstones and writings attesting their piety; and in the necessity of fleeing them physically and mentally for peace of mind.

1. In A History of Private Life from Pagan Rome to Byzantium, ed. Paul Veyne, p. 248
3. Given eloquent expression in 'the usual oath regarding wives' given at the census: 'Have you, to the best of your knowledge and belief, a wife?' Cicero de orat. 2.260, Gellius NA 4.20; and cf. Cicero's tale of a man whose extreme informality was in fact bigamy ; though under Roman law marrying a second wife might betoken de facto divorce of the first with no further notification; Cic. de orat. 1.40.183
4. Testified in Martial 10.41 - spoken by a woman
5. Paul Veyne, op. cit. p. 36
6. Ibid. p. 37; citing Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, pp. 44 ff; Plutarch, Moralia 140D and 142D
7. cf. Callistratus (D. 49.14.2.7) on the rescripts of several emperors concerning the fiscus to prevent people damaging their own rights by inadvisable admissions: from inexperience and ignorance of their rights, the high-risk groups are rustics and women. Ignorance of the law could, however, be an advantage; it could excuse female defendants - but not male (cf. Jane Gardner, Women in Roman Law and Society p. 126). The wife of a friend of Pliny's was puffed off for her epistolary talents (though apparently her husband received much of the credit for their composition); but Seneca's mother was forbidden to study philosophy by her husband who saw it as the road to dissolution. Cited in Paul Veyne, op. cit. p. 20-1
8. 'Their contempt of death is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation. For they include not only men but also women who refrain from cohabiting all their lives; and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.' Galen cited in an Arabic anthology; see R. Walzer, Galen on Jews and Christians, p. 15
9. In A History of Private Life (see n. 1) p. 264; though I consider he makes rather too much of this distinction. His assertion that issues of sexual control were heightened 'in a community anxious to avoid marriage with pagans' does not chime wth many of the examples we have of Christian girls married to pagans in the humbler sections of society no less than in the aristocracy; as with Nonna, Gorgonia, Monica.
10. cf. Paul Veyne, op.cit. p. 40
11. Peter Brown in A History of Private Life, p. 248
12. Peter Brown in Augustine of Hippo, p.62
13. Jane Gardner, op. cit. p. 58; D 25,7,1,1
14. Paul Veyne, op. cit. p. 76
15. D 48.5.14 (13)
16. Jane Gardner, op. cit. p. 58; Libanius, Or. 1.278; Augustine, Confs 6.15; Peter Brown, Augustine p. 61
17. In Paul Veyne, op. cit. p. 46 Moralia, 140B, 144B,144D, 144F.
18. In fact, wives were well advised to put up with the philandering, having no recourse and given the dangers of seeking consolation. 'A wife could not prosecute her husband since in the eyes of the law he had committed no offence against their marriage [only against the other woman's] and women could prosecute in criminal courts only for offences against themselves. She could perhaps get her pater or someone else to prosecute him, but only if the 'other woman' was married and then only if the latter's husband failed to prosecute within the statutory time-limit.' Jane Gardner, op. cit. p. 127-8
19. Augustine, Serm. 9.4

20. And because of some of the revenges wrought upon adulterers caught in the act - homosexual rape, castration, and mutilation amongst them: cf. Amy Richlin, "Approaches to the sources on adultery at Rome" in Reflections on Women in Antiquity, ed. Helene Foley, p. 397
21. Augustine, Serm. 392.4 & 6 - described by Peter Brown as 'Augustine and his flock in head-on collision' (op. cit. p. 247); John Chrysostom, Hom. 5 on I Thessalonians 2
22. In A History of Private Life p. 263
23. Terence, Hecyra, 2.1.4; Plutarch, Moralia 2.143; Augustine. Confessions 9.9
24. Jerome, Lets.108.1, 127.1; Paulinus of Nola, Let. 129.6ff, 129.12; Palladius, LH 46; Augustine, Lets. 130.1, 150; Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 8.6
25. Or. 7.4; de Rebus Suis 116; De Vita Sua 51, 55; Or. 18.10 & 30, On the Funeral of his Father; Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Mac., PG 46.962A; Jerome, Let. 123.1 - 14; Palladius, LH 61
26. Plutarch Moralia 140D; Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The Life of St. Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa', p. 443, in The Craft of the Ancient Historian - Essays in Honour of Chester G. Starr, 1985. He also infers somewhat the same attitude on the part of Pliny the Younger in his care of his wife.
27. Confessions 9.9
28. Or. 8.11 & 20; and see n. 9, supra
29. De Rebus Suis 116; Or. 7.4; Or. 8.4 & 5; Or. 18.5, 8 & 11.
30. Palladius, LH. 61; Augustine, Let. 126.7
31. Or. 18.8 & 21
32. Paulinus, Lets. 39 & 44
33. Peter Brown, in A History of Private Life, p. 265 ff.; Augustine Soliloquia 38.347-48
34. Anon Apophth. 82; De Bono Conjugali, 1 & 31; on the Sermon on the Mount 1.15.41 - later revised, Retract. 1.19.5
35. Peter Brown, in A History of Private Life, p. 307-8 - though I consider his argument that Augustine represents Adam and Eve in paradise as a fully married human couple complete with sexuality as simply not born out in Augustine's writings.
36. Jerome Let. 66.3
37. Or. 8.8; Jerome Let. 22; Chrys., Hom. 19 on I Cor. VII.1
39. De Rebus Suis 425 ff.; De Vita Sua 65 ff.; Jerome, Life of Saint Hilarion 13
41. Paulinus of Nola, Lets. 39 & 41; Jerome, Lets. 47, 71 & 75
42. Alph. Eucharistichos; LH 8; HM 14.10-13;
43. Jerome, Let. 122.4; Augustine, Let. 262
44. Ibid. 262.4; Rousselle, op. cit. p. 191
45. Cassian, Coll. 21.8-9; Alph. Paph. 4
46. Augustine, Let. 220.12
47. Jane Gardner, op. cit. p. 146
48. Confs. 1.11,13,16-18, 2.2-3
49. Rosemary Radford Ruether, Gregory of Nazianzus, Rhetor and Philosopher, p. 156
50. Ors. 27.1; 34.10; 43.11; Let. 11; Carmina ad Seleucum 1.61; echoing his friend and colleague, Basil of Caesarea's Address to young men on the right use of Greek Literature; translated by F. M. Padelford in Yale Studies in English, New York 1902. 'Both advocated plucking literature from its native value system of [Christian] philosophy. Both would envisage a paideia in which literature, 'purged' of its indecency, could be used to buttress morality and introduce the student to the higher life'; Rosemary Ruether, op. cit. p. 174

51. Jerome Let. 108.6; Gregory of Nazianzus Or. 7.4; Augustine Confessions 3.11.
52. Life of Melania the Younger sec. 33; Alph. Mark, 3-4 & Poemen 76; John Chrysostom On the Priesthood 2.11-23.
53. Jerome Lets. 108.5; 127.4; 39.4. Jill Harries, "'Treasure in Heaven': Property and Inheritance Among Senators of Late Rome" in Marriage and Property, ed. E. Craik, 1984. Greg. of Nyssa, Life of Mac., in PG 966D, 970B, 982A.
54. Greg. of Nazianzus, Or. 18.21; 7.12.
55. Life of Melania the Younger sec. 1; ibid. 12, though the biographer, Gerontius, erroneously believes Publicola to have had other children. Their legal position is outlined in more detail by Jill Harries, art. cit. p. 66. Vita 10; Ibid. 19; Augustine, Lets. 125 & 126
56. Jerome, Let. 108.15; Alph. John the Dwarf 40
57. Aug. Let. 262.4 & 9
58. Peter Brown's judgements on Proba and Juliana, Augustine, p. 351 & 6 drawing on Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae 30.5.4-10 & Zosimus, Historia Nova 6.7. Augustine, Lets. 130.30; 126.1; 188.1.
59. Jerome, Vita Hilarion 14 & 29; Augustine, Lets. 92 & 99; John Chrysostom Let. 170;
60. Jerome Let. 107.7; Paulinus, Let. 29; LH 41.
61. Paulinus, Life of Ambrose, 36; Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 8.5; Peter Brown, Augustine pp 62-3; Augustine, Confessions 6.15.25; de fide et oper. 19.35
62. Augustine, Let. 243.10; Confessions 5.8; John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood secs. 21, 542; PJ 4.68; Anon. Apophth. 135

'Not by office, but by gifts of the Spirit':

The ministries of women

This chapter is a consideration of what devout women would actually do; what skills they had to offer, what positions of responsibility they could find or create, and their relationship with authority in the 4th century Church. We must consider their social role as 'holy' individuals and how far this can be constituted as a job of work; and their place as leaders or members of organised communities and the ministry implicit therein. We must examine whether they turned to the Church to fulfil a need for purpose uncatered for in earlier times; or as a relief from the insecurities of their own times. Eva Cantarella considers that the 4th century saw a quelling of a process of perceptible 'emancipation' of women that had been gradually arrived at in the preceding centuries. [1] I shall consider the nature of this 'emancipation', or the lack of it, in real terms. In earlier centuries, women had not been backward in seeking the distinction of martyrdom as an area in which, as well as men, they could climb to the very top of the ladder; in so doing they had provided important foci for their Christian communities. For women of the 4th century, however, there are increasing tensions implicit in serving the Church; with legitimation came an increasing preoccupation with hierarchy and structuralization in the Church, in emulation of the lay society. We must consider then, how women were to perform services of any moment within this increasingly rigid structure and within a theology which, while encouraging women in their individual gifts of the spirit and special metaphysical talents, oppressed their bodies and strictly limited both their public involvement and even physical movement.

The practical activities of Christian women of the 4th century are usually assessed in their own terms. Yet they were also the product of a more long-term context, the background of 'women at work' in the Roman world: traditional expectations of what women did and what kinds of women could be expected to be active in what we would call the professional occupations. Attempting to exercise any kind of executive power against tight and detailed control would have been something of an art alike for pre-Christian women as for those in our area of survey. We should consider in what areas they manifest any directorial control; and where they do so, whether the lessons and manipulative skills earlier generations learned could be usefully transmitted to successors whose abilities were judged by a more doctrinally justified oppression.

Traditional areas of work and responsibilty for women

In business and commerce thinking was reasonably liberal on the capacity of some women as to their acumen and practical abilities. The law acknowledged women's right to transact business, and was indifferent to the sex of an institor; thus many women are to be found in papyri and tablets buying, selling, leasing and loaning - and seemingly over-seeing their own business interests. That they owned ships and other large-scale business ventures is documented. We know of some 21 female officinatores leasing clay-yards at Rome; women who were money-lenders and pawn-brokers, sometimes on a large scale, and sometimes, as in the upper classes, in a semi-private capacity, such as Otacilia Laterensis, who sued her lover for a debt of 300,000 HS; and a negotiatrix, a dealer in silver (as opposed to a mere silver-worker or argentaria). [2]

Given an initially favourable situation for undertaking a commercial enterprise, the difficulties were more likely to arise from women's legal disabilities. Unless possessed of a very supportive or liberal family, a woman would need to be sui iuris to contemplate

entering this sphere; and then was still subject to tutorial consent for certain transactions. This might or might not be a formality; there was no great incentive for the tutor to take seriously his duties, which were in any case essentially negative, restraining his charge from diminishing her property. This being so, his presence did not necessarily protect the women's interests; Cicero tells the tale of Caesennia who elected to employ a business agent, Aebutius, who subsequently defrauded her, seemingly without her tutor being involved at any stage. A more active liability was the Senatusconsultum Velleianum, which prohibited the giving of security or undertaking of liability on behalf of others by women. The jurist Paul says that this measure was desirable 'because of the danger to the res familiaris,' but it seems to have been equally intended to protect women: from their own inexperience, or from undue influence exercised by members of their family which might lead them to undertake open-ended commitments as guarantors. It would, however, effectively exempt them from a wide range of business activities, since no creditor would be able to sue a woman guarantor for recovery of debts and therefore we may reasonably infer great reluctance from businessmen to accept a woman as surety on someone else's behalf. However, the praetor did have the discretionary right to grant exceptio, so that the creditor could recover his debt from a woman, if it could be established that she was fully aware of what she was doing. The irony from the later viewpoint is that this protective device completely fails to make provision for the actions of a woman such as Paula who, wittingly, with full cognizance and against the best advice of her male mentors, ran herself and her heirs headlong into debts which she had no possibility - and seemingly no intention - of repaying. However, the lessons learned from the forays made by women into various commercial enterprises were that, given a pliant family or spouse - or, maybe by preference, no family or spouse to consider - and at least one biddable male agent, their money was as good as anyone

else's for mutual profit; lessons that the Melanias and Paula may be seen putting into practice under quite another consideration of 'profit' later on. [3]

The bulk of 'women at work' are to be found in spheres that may be classed as 'service industries' of one sort and another; of procuring or maintaining products or providing personal care. More has been written on the occupations of lower class women and freedwomen, and we find epigraphic attestations to the ornatrices (hairdressers), pedisequae (attendants), quasillariae (spinners), sarcinatrices (clothes-menders), nutrices (wet-nurses) and those employed in other attendant industries, clothes-folding, bath-attendants, weavers, nannies, and so on. [4] Women are attested also, though more rarely, in 'white collar' professional areas. Though at less responsible levels than male professionals, they appear as librariae, a manu and amanuenses (scribes, clerks and secretaries) and lectrices (readers). [5]

Women, however, attained a higher degree of responsibility in a field that many cultures traditionally have regarded as the especial province of men: that of medicine. Indeed, in certain respects in Roman medicine, women were indispensable; opstetrices, midwives, were always female; and they were, ideally, highly trained, highly responsible and highly thought of by the male doctors, who, perforce, placed a great deal of reliance in their judgement. For gynaecological treatment, Roman women went to their midwives, who would supervise pregnancy and parturition and treat gynaecological disorders; not to the male doctors, who Galen and Soranus show us hiding behind a curtain during childbirth, questioning the midwife as to the stage reached, and apparently ready to intervene in the case of an emergency. However, given that dissection was not practised and most of their conclusions about female bodies were extrapolated from examining the bodies of animals, in many cases, the male doctors - who, as we have seen in the

last chapter, had some curious ideas about female anatomy - must have been manifestly less qualified to deal with gynaecological emergencies than the midwives, who under certain circumstances might undertake surgery. With all of this in mind, it is less than surprising that Soranus' textbook on gynaecology, written for midwives with access to female patients, specifies - and apparently expects to find - a high calibre of female trainee:

> A suitable person will be literate, with her wits about her, possessed of a good memory, loving work, respectable and generally not unduly handicapped as regards her senses, sound of limb, robust, and according to some people, endowed with long slim fingers and short nails at her fingertips. [6]

Women might be trained not only for gynaecology, but in general medicine; they appear, freelance and employed privately in households, freed and freeborn, not just as opstetrices but also as medicae, physicians, implying yet another level of learning, training, and application in an area traditionally the domain of the menfolk. A husband commended his wife: 'You were not deficient in my art, woman though you were.' Aemilia Hilaria, aunt of Ausonius, became, it seems, a 'dedicated virgin' in order that she might more freely follow her chosen path, and 'occupied herself in the art of healing, like a man'. Aemilia Hilaria is also interesting in indicating what may have helped in undertaking a man's profession: seemingly she 'hated the female sex' - Domnina of Neoclaudiopolis who 'warded off diseases' seems to have shown a similar attitude. Nicarete, one of Olympias and Chrysostom's circle in Constantinople also enjoyed a high reputation for skill in this field; she compounded her own drugs for free dispensation amongst the poor, and it was claimed by her admirers that she had cured many patients abandoned as hopeless by members of the medical faculty. [7]

For other categories of female 'white-collar' workers, we have little indication. Though traditionally a male job, there were occasional paedagogae and educatrices; Galba's two young daughters apparently had a tutor of each sex. But these, though they might have started off some primary education, were more child-minders or nannies than teachers. In law, women might bring suit for themselves and even represent themselves, but they might not represent others, even their own children as minors. Diocletian and Maximian reinforced this point to an enquirer, Dionysia: 'To undertake the defence of another is a man's function (virile officium) and is agreed to be beyond the female sex. So if your son is a minor, get him a tutor.' And since the SC Velleianum debarred the transfer of obligation with regard to women, they might only be a cognitor (representative) in litigation as far as it concerned their own property. [8]

By cultural expectation, religion was an area in which women were required to act to uphold the status quo as well as the men. Roman traditional religions made place for women celebrants, though fewer, and strictly segregated; and in fact prefigured Christian ideas by sorting women and their right to worship by marital and social status. There were separate cults for virgins (Vesta and Fortuna Virginalis), for matronae (the Bona Dea and Fortuna Primigenia) and for univirae - either the widows or the sub-category of married women (Fortuna Muliebris and Pudicitia, for patrician univirae; Plebeian women celebrated rites of Plebeian Chastity). Slave women celebrated the rites of the Nonae Caprotinae, prostitutes those of Fortuna Virilis. Later, more suspect additions to the calendar would seem to offer women more scope, most seriously in the cult of Isis. In her worship, women could not merely mingle with men but exercise ministry. All had an immortal soul, despite social status or sex; her priests could be either women or men. Further this freedom was open to all women; besides being a wife and

mother, Isis had, according to her legend, been a prostitute for ten years and her doors were not closed even to probrosae. In some vital respects, evidently, this cult bore more than a passing resemblance to Christianity: another egalitarian doctrine of universal love and common (un)worthiness. But in this vital respect, they were very different: not all could exercise ministry, specifically not women, and maintain orthodoxy. [9]

Eva Cantarella finds this aspect of Isis worship of great importance as evidence of an attempted sea-change in the climate of opinion in Rome towards greater freedom and authority for women. The new religions, she believes 'helped women escape the restricting conditions that the ancient cults told them were inevitable'; adducing that they saw them as restrictive and found a need to escape. This seems to me to be rather anachronistic in the history of ideas with regard to the concept of 'liberation' being applicable to women of this era. Respectable matronae were more likely to have seen this as an infringement of their elite status. This kind of 'liberation' cut across all the barriers they had been brought up to believe they were special for upholding: prostitutes and other probrosae might be only too happy to believe themselves 'equal to freeborn persons and men respectively' but the 'freeborn persons' stood only to lose. [10]

If not quite proving their grasp of 'emancipation' by developing a taste for weird Eastern cult religions, however, I think it is true that women of the pre-Christian Empire were showing increasing interest and independence in religious orientation; as manifested by the interest in and patronage of various philosophical schools shown by a number of well-born women. Galen wrote of Arria, the wife of N. Nonnius Macrinus, said to be the friend of emperors, who was interested in Platonic philosophy. Philostratus claimed the interest of Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus, in his life of Apollonius of Tyana:

Julia Mamaea, the mother of Alexander Severus, invited Origen to Antioch so that she could hear him, and gave him a military escort. C. Diogenes Laertius dedicated his lives of the Greek philosophers to a woman who was a follower of Plato but whom he wanted to interest in other philosophy, especially that of the Epicureans. This is not emancipation made manifest: this is the kind of intelligent interest habitually encouraged by the Romans in the women in whom they found it - given that they were well-born enough to be able to afford the education to support it. And these distinguished women supporting intellectual causes pave the way for their descendants of the 4th century who played leading roles in defending paganism in retreat, as did Hypatia of Alexandria, as well as promoting ascetic Christianity. [11]

Some conclusions

From examining these spheres of influence and authority demonstrated by women in the era preceding ours, certain patterns become evident. Firstly, that women are traditionally stronger in fields involving nurturing, providing and purveying. This can be taken to fairly high levels of responsibility; given a free rein from family and tutorial restraint, the commercial world was fairly open to them. But even so there would always have been the necessity to employ a male agent for the many tasks they would have been unable to deal with directly in 'their' businesses; in some cases they must have been in the situation of providing the capital and interest in businesses with which in practice they had very little to do. Thus the provisions in law for a husband and wife to form a business <u>societas</u> in which she contributes only money and receives an entitlement to some of the profits, and is in other respects a 'sleeping' partner. Significant in this respect, perhaps, is the evidence that women are attested as patronesses of guilds (<u>collegia</u>), but nowhere as members of them other than one or two all-female groups or <u>ornatrices</u> or actresses. As Jane Gardner points

out, this is not in itself evidence for exclusion; it may be explained by the relatively smaller numbers of women involved and by many of those giving up their work on marriage. But for those who give up on marriage, we also find attested women who undertake to continue in their husbands' trade after his death; these if any should have had an entitlement to be a guild-member - if any such were acknowledged to exist. It would appear more likely that the guilds were also at home with the figure of the female provider of largesse from a distance, while not acknowledging any equity of position: a stance that has some echoes in the later period amongst Church organisations. It would be of great assistance in deciding the degree of real autonomy exercised by women in this sphere if we knew how many of them had initiated their own enterprises from scratch as opposed to sharing or inheriting an interest from family or spouse. [12]

As we have seen, women of status are proportionately fewer in professional areas; and the regions which they do infiltrate may again be categorised as 'service industries'. The question once more arises of their impetus into these domains; some of those found obviously gained their entry through family involvement. It would be interesting, however, to know how a woman of the class of Nicarete, who belonged to 'a very illustrious family', or Aemilia Hilaria commenced; the meagre evidence of Ausonius' valedictory poem on his aunt seems to imply that she unilaterally embarked on her chosen field and rather surprised her respectable family in so doing. It would also be advantageous to know under what circumstances these women practised - did a consecrated virgin like Aemilia Hilaria practise in the community? or for gain? - and on what kind of basis, if at all, they treated men. If the dictates of propriety forbade male doctors from gaining critical knowledge about the operations of the female body, presumably the restrictions would not be lighter for female doctors attempting to gain more knowledge of male

anatomy.

The other strong pattern demonstrated is, as might be expected, the preferential class bias. Given that only limited options were open to women generally, some women had advantages of birth and situation that enabled them to circumvent the traditional obstacles to a certain extent. Their home circumstances were influential to a high degree. The disallowances were common to all: but some women owned their own property, had a more reasonable spouse or family, or no spouse or family but a good inheritance, while tutelage was a formality for some women but not for others. Though in some ways restricted by the segregation required by their high birth, women of higher status possessed more ways of extending the boundaries of their activities. There was little possibility for the generality of women of rising from humble origins by talent through service the way their brothers might. However, influence even as wielded by women of distinction only went so far; their wealth and powers of purveyance were preferred to their skills, a preference frequently perceptible in our later era. By definition, as creatures without civilia officia, women were precluded from exercising any determinative say in policy or the fates of others. They could not participate in the cursus honorum, or executively in the courts; even to defend themselves in the courts was seen as a matter for tutorial approval. For an Emperor or public official to take female counsel over a decision was seen as something best covered over: Augustus' dependence on Livia was marvelled at in a good Emperor, Nero's on Agrippina cited as shameful in a bad one.

'Women at work' in the Christian empire

In a consideration of the active roles played by the pious women of the 4th - 5th centuries, the same kind of patterns are evident. There are still no-go areas for women and different kinds of personal

restraint which they have to negotiate. The Church conforms to conventions of Roman society in prohibiting the ministry of women; once again they become instrumental in the capacity of service, either personal or organisational. The businesswomen and patronae of the 2nd - 3rd centuries become the church patronesses of the 4th and 5th, utilising satellite clerics as their predecessors used business agents - witness Melania the Elder and Paula employing Rufinus and Jerome as a species of church business agent. Those previously in what we would regard as 'service industries' become those playing Martha, tending the community and its derelicts; or providing prayer as a function of service, as we shall further examine. Also very much in evidence is the class divergence. The occurrence of well-born and well-to-do matrons using their resources to circumvent gender restrictions is eminently applicable to a study of the aristocratic Christian women, as we have seen, and will examine further, in their proclivity for creating their own pressure points on the boundaries of legitimate authority; though there was in the new religion more scope for the recognition of merit and example in pious members of the humiliores. Given a situation, further, where many of the roles and systems were still being hammered out, birth, money and contacts were even more useful than in previous centuries in influencing the creation of 'jobs' for women in the absence of given models.

There is also a greater void of activities appropriate to women of the upper ranks who would find it less seemly to involve themselves in some of the more menial functions of piety - for instance the cleaning and tending of the church fabric and bodily needs of the clerics - the way devotees of lesser caste could. Women of the humiliores, too, were in the forefront of the monastic movement; earlier than the aristocratic women, and earlier than the generality of the men. From the middle of the third century congregations of women existed; Antony, accredited

with being the father of monasticism, already knew of the community in which he could place his sister before his own withdrawal from the world. But as with the religion itself, this was a trend which would start from the bottom of society and only percolate gradually upward, until it reached the classes elevated enough to merit literary attention and so figure more prominently in our sources. The women who receive much of the attention were not necessarily the trail-blazers in their chosen means of expression of piety: but they were innovators because they were aristocrats and because it was they who took the initiative, and in being women creating communities for women and overtly exercising creative leadership. What seems to have been the experience at first of Melania, Paula and her family and Marcella and Asella, hemmed in by the expectations of the haute monde, was the round of Christianity of the polite salons, where inspiring works were read and fashionable clerics like Epiphanius, Athanasius, Jerome and Pelagius lionised; in which pursuits they were certainly following the lead of such as Julia Maesa, Julia Domna and Arria, as we have seen, in assisting with the airing of the new philosophical and religious concerns.

For many of them, this was enough. For those for whom it was not, those who wanted to actually apply the messages they learned at these discussions, there were few readily available routes of expression of the new ideals. So they set about creating their own - and hence the need for making their own models for pious employment. When Marcella embraced avowed widowhood and Marcellina, sister of Ambrose, took the veil as a virgin, there were no convents in Rome; inspired by accounts of coenobitic life and wishing to implement it in combination with what they knew, they retired to live as in a cell within their family houses, living a life of study, devotional exercises and abstinence. Having little example but the alien lifestyle of the desert ascetics, they turned their hands to what they found around them, and in doing so

attracted others and imitators. By the end of the century, Rome was well-stocked with convents [13]; and a generation after their initiative, Olympias would follow the same course at Constantinople, inspiring others by her example. Macrina and Emmelia also turned their family property at Annesi into their convent. Some women, however, wished to go even further. Many took as their apostolic model the legendary Thecla, apocryphal disciple of St. Paul, who was heavily drawn on as an inspiration in this period in writings directed at women; at Macrina's birth, her mother was vouchsafed a vision in which Macrina was hailed as the new Thecla, and Egeria counted her visit to Thecla's martyrium one of the highspots of her pilgrimage. This canvassing of Thecla is significant for the evolution of asceticism as practised by women: Thecla, in the apocryphal Acts, sacrificed home, family and fiance to follow Paul. She cut her hair in order to be able to travel as a man and was impervious to pressure from family or state to give up her vocation. She escaped miraculously from various encounters with wild beasts in the arena and even claimed the right to baptize herself; ultimately Paul authorised her to be an apostle of the Gospel and she wound up as a contemplative in a mountain cave, teaching and healing those who came to her. Inspired by such an audacious, but feted, example in addition to the lives of such as Antony and Pachomius, some chose a more absolute renunciation of the world and following notions of depositio ad sanctos, Melania the Elder and Paula gave the lead in more actively selling all that they had; to relocate, and create entirely, under their own hands, the kind of systems they thought meet. [14]

In these new monastic ventures, the class bias is yet further revealed. Aristocratic advantages were something of a sine qua non. The prerequisites necessary to make these enterprises successful were only to be found in the gift of a Melania or Paula: a capacity for mobility of oneself and one's resources from one part of the empire to

another; support from and alliance with notable ecclesiastics; the ability to bring pressure on local government and governors of provinces to ensure survival and assistance for the embryonic communities. In displaying this 'creative leadership', these well-born women provided for themselves the opportunity to establish the real and public personal authority that previously they had been denied the right to exercise overtly. The reverse side of this coin was that the new foundations were then firmly established in a style most likely to guard their founders' aristocratic leadership: exercising what Rosemary Ruether sees as 'the highest self-development as autonomous persons', Melania, Macrina, Paula and Olympias were firmly in control of their own institutions. [15]

There is an obvious dividing point then in considering women of authority and ministry in the 4th - 5th centuries - one of background and class.

Aristocratic dynameis: The monastic foundress and her authority

One of the major tasks found by devout women of status, then, was heading a community. We have taken as the obvious starting-point those who were at the forefront of the drive to create the community life and their own position in it; naturally, examples of those who were not in this position are more numerous. Nonetheless, it makes a logical starting-point for the examination of the task of heading a community, for the information it gives us about what these women who were in a position to dictate considered their priorities; and at what stage they stopped being able to decide policy and simply turned into subordinates of the local bishop. These aristocratic women were singular in their influence, wealth and coverage in our sources: but it is interesting to observe how after their initial period of 'creative leadership' necessary to give a monastic foundation its impetus they very often do

become as it were servants of their own scheme; merely the housekeeper of something deemed greater than the sum of their contribution towards it.

I shall consider first, therefore, what may be learned from the monasteries instigated by Paula and Melania the Elder: these stand out as the primary establishers of sizeable monastic communities built from scratch, as opposed to foundations grown gradually from domestic roots (as in the case of such as Macrina's). Albina and Melania the Younger also exercised a degree of creative leadership in building communities but as additions to that initiated by their illustrious forebear, rather than as creations from grassroots. Both Melania the Elder and Paula settled and built following a period, quite prolonged in Melania's case, of peregrinations: part pilgrimage, part sight-seeing, part, it would seem, a search for the just and proper end for their embarrassment of riches. As will be shown later, Melania tried several outlets for her awesome almsgiving, with mixed receptions, before finally settling to creating a solid investment in prayer and its propagation with her mentor and factotum, Rufinus. Both found suitably inspirational sites for prayerful deposits. Melania settled her convent, with Rufinus at Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives; Paula, despite being drawn towards establishing her convent at Nitria, near the esteemed Serapion, finally succumbed to Jerome's urging and settled at Bethlehem, which had also moved her deeply. (Perhaps this hint of a tug-of-war between Fathers of different province and outlook is to account for the sourness of the attitude of Palladius towards Jerome in connection with Paula; a devotee of the Egyptian coenobites, perhaps this is what he has in mind when he says that 'a certain Jerome hindered her by his jealousy, having induced her to serve his own plan'.) [16] Melania and Rufinus' establishment of twin houses for men and women, constructed probably around 379-80 may well have been guided by the Basilian rule which Rufinus was later to

translate and spread to the West; and they in their turn gave their influence to Jerome and Paula, who stayed there in 385 before constructing their own establishment - and before falling into a bitter and permanent rift over Origenism with their erstwhile hosts, only a few short years after their visit. The rule observed in both Houses was certainly rigorous enough. The day was spent in a mixture of prayer, manual work, charitable work for the poor and pilgrims, and the study of scripture. They observed six hours of prayer: at dawn, at the third, sixth and ninth hours, at evening and midnight. The intervening hours were filled with Bible reading, the menial tasks of the convent and other manual tasks such as sewing. Writing in 398, Jerome described how Paula and Eustochium, 'shabbily and sombrely clad, positive heroines in comparison with their former selves, trim lamps, light fires, sweep floors, clean vegetables, put cabbage heads into the boiling pot, lay tables, hand round cups, serve food, and run to and fro to wait on others'. And besides the ongoing round of practical disciplines and monastic housekeeping, they allotted much time to a gruelling schedule of study of scripture and theology - in these their houses the women had no intention of being restricted to the 'women's work' of care and service. The emphasis for Melania and Paula both was on the 'better part' and their ability to bring this aspect to fruition was another result and advantage of their upbringing, (though emphasis was given to the attributes of playing Martha also). While their male colleagues studied and disputed [17] the women followed equally demanding academic schedules. Melania

> turned night into day perusing every writing of the ancient commentators, including 3,000,000 lines of Origen and 2,500,000 lines of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil and other standard writers. Nor did she read them once only and casually, but she laboriously went through each book seven or eight times.

Paula and Eustochium studied Hebrew until they could chant psalms in it without a trace of a Latin accent and their knowledge of it bettered

Jerome's, as he freely admitted; and, like Marcella, they kept Jerome at full pitch supplying exegeses, analyses and answers to her textual and spiritual queries. For all her evident linguistic ability. Paula's interest was not the textually literalist approach of Marcella, with her scholarly disquisitions into obscure words and phrases. She placed more value, according to Jerome, on the morally or spiritually edifying messages which, by deft use of allegory, could be extracted from it. And in pursuit of these she and Eustochium kept Jerome working at breakneck speed. It was in response to their urgent petitions, he averred, that he embarked on his translation and commentary of Origen's Homilies on Luke, interrupting other work on which he was engaged; at their instigation, after some resistance, he tried his hand as a biblical commentator, when they clamoured for expositions of St. Paul, culminating in his commentaries On Philemon. On Galatians and On Ephesians. Paula also talked him reluctantly into supervising her and Eustochium's studies of the Old and New Testaments and pushed him to the limits of his learning in her own quest: 'Whenever I stuck fast and honestly confessed myself at fault, she would by no means rest content but would force me by fresh questions to point out to her which of many different solutions seemed to me most probable.' [18]

The rigours of their schedule of activities were compounded by a dietary and personal regimen of much hardship and deprivation. Melania wore 'rags', slept on the ground, and asserted her ascendancy in this respect over an unwary cleric whom she had caught cooling his limbs with cold water in a heatwave by declaring

> How dare you at your age, when your blood is still vigorous, thus coddle your flesh, not perceiving the mischief that is engendered by it? ...I am in the sixtieth year of my life, and except for the tips of my fingers, neither my face nor my feet nor any one of my limbs have touched water, although I am a victim to various ailments and the doctors try to force me. I have not consented to make the customary concessions to the flesh, never in my travels have I rested on a bed or used a litter.

Be this as it may, Jerome seems to have thought the ascetic standards observed on the Mount of Olives much laxer and less demanding than he considered suitable. Certainly Melania's vigour was not noticeably diminished by this behaviour. Paula, on the other hand, mortified her flesh to the point of endangering her health and alarming those around her. Jerome, despite being an enthusiastic admirer of extreme ascetic practices of dietary abstinence and personal slovenliness and squalor, says of Paula's customs in this respect 'I admit that in this [Paula] was too determined, refusing to spare herself or listen to advice'. Bishop Epiphanius even intervened on an occasion when she was ill to induce her to take some wine; instead of being persuaded, she nearly induced him to give up the practice. In this, she and her acolytes were proving the capacity of women to properly follow exemplary ascetic practices established by the Desert Fathers they so much admired: on the basis of established medical theories of the time of the chastening effect of a diet calculated to 'dry' the 'wet humours' of the body, they, like Antony and Pachomius, ate little and coarse food, and went without the sleep that Oribasius wrote moistened the body; in the belief that 'the drier the body, the more the soul flourishes'. It rendered the body more fit to pray by starving it of the physical fuel for emotional and sexual impulses. On an every-day level the ascetics, women as much as men, controlled their passions and sexuality through a lifestyle based on physiology and a carefully chosen diet. Jerome's theory that previously married women were more at risk from temptation to fornication because of their knowledge of exactly what they were missing out on might thus have influenced Paula's insistence on an extreme of ascesis; if her body was more at risk, she may have felt it all the more important to forestall any risk of temptation through physical comfort. (It does not, however, seem to have been effective in drying up her tendency to emotional excesses that Jerome had deplored in the aftermath of Blesilla's death - even under the effects of this

lifestyle, she still remained 'easily moved to sorrow and crushed by the deaths of her kinsfolk' so that 'when one after another her husband and her daughters fell asleep, on each occasion the shock of their loss endangered her life'.) [19]

Those 'inheriting' their authority indicate some of the same preoccupations, notably with study of the scripture and rigorous observance of the offices; the extremes of personal deprivation receive rather less attention. Eustochium quietly took over from her formidable mother under conditions rendered considerably less favourable by her mother's actions: as we have seen, Paula had run her foundation into considerable debt which 'Eustochium...cannot hope to pay off by her own exertions' in her contempt for worldly securities. Eustochium was abjured by Jerome nonetheless not to abandon the 'crowd of needy brothers and sisters whom it is hard for her to support but whom it would be undutiful to cast off'. Seemingly she shouldered this burden with Christian submission. Kelly has pointed out, however, that the situation may have been improved by some providential advice; found by Jerome's translation in 404, the year of Paula's death, at the solicitation of a priest named Silvanus, of some fundamental writings of Pachomius, including his Rule and the extremely important Doctrina de institutione monachorum of his second successor Horsiesi. These contained a wealth of practical, down-to-earth regulations concerning not only the daily worship and conduct of the monks and the organisation of the various houses but also with the agricultural tasks or numerous trades in which the monks were engaged, with everyone allocated work in proportion to his strength - providing a solid economic foundation which it seems Jerome's and Paula's houses lacked, with their amateurish arrangements originally based on their foundress' seemingly boundless wealth. Jerome notes in his preface that in breaking his long silence one of his objects was to provide Eustochium with something she might

pass on to her sisters to put into practice, and to enable his own brothers to imitate the life of the Egyptian monks: we may conjecture that this practical advice, come at the most opportune moment, may have done much to help Eustochium put the convent on a more practical financial footing. About her time in charge of the convent we know really very little; she gains no more attention from Jerome in his letters. Having helped initiate the house she would be well-placed to maintain it; she left the foundation in good heart to Paula the Younger, her niece, on her own death in 419.

In contrast to Eustochium's retiring ways, Melania the Younger remained conspicuous even after terminating her visits to the desert coenobites and settling to ruling her convent of 90 women, twin to Pinianus' house of men. Though lecturing her cousin Paula the Younger on the true humility necessary in an ascetic, Melania remained a high-profile figure, noted for her church-building, her visits to and influence upon temporal authorities and her healing powers, brought to bear on, amongst others, the Empress Eudocia who visited Melania's convent on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem; and on a young woman afflicted with a dead foetus which she could not bear - made the occasion for an object lesson for her virgins on the curses of childbearing, from which chastity had delivered them. Though Albina had instituted and completed the new monastery on the Mount of Olives, we know Melania developed the rule for the governance of the convent, detailing the daily round of prayer and the rules of spiritual growth. She also oversaw the construction of another monastery for men, dedicated to the chanting of continuous psalmody. She followed a study schedule at least as demanding as her grandmother's, reading both Testaments three or four times a year, plus lives of saints and the Fathers, homilies and canonical books: 'such was her erudition that when she read in Latin, she seemed to all to have no knowledge of Greek, but then she read Greek

so that it seemed she could not be acquainted with Latin.' Further she copied out texts of which she had need and distributed copies to others; she was known for the elegance and correctness of her manuscripts. She slept only about two hours a night, according to Gerontius, to fit in her exacting timetable. Her ascetic regime was similarly demanding, following those she had read of in the Lives of the Fathers, with special deprivations for Easter and the feast of the Resurrection. The deaths of Albina and Pinianus in 431-2 left her in exclusive charge of these church and monastic compounds. [20]

The interesting feature of such dynamic leadership by women of the aristocracy is how the communities it serves become subservient to dynastic ends. They become an expression of what in later medieval times would become known as Eigenkirchen; the community as a family concern in the same way as a business interest. Paula hands on the reins to Eustochium, and she to Paula the Younger; Melania the Elder to Albina and she to Melania the Younger. Marcella and Macrina regarded their mothers as notionally their superiors in religion and had they had obvious female kinsfolk left surviving, it is a fair bet that these would have succeeded them. Even the church comes to serve this end of dynastic empire building. These women had proved their more absolute devoutness than the pious sight-seers whom the Desert Fathers regarded as such an annoyance, for whom making the pilgrimage to the holy sites before returning to domesticity, and some almsgiving, were the ultimate expression of piety. The reward for their superior performance was the legitimation by the church and church writers of their superior status - which had its origins in the superior birth all affected to despise as part of the new Christian commonalty. Interestingly, this attitude is overtly evidential in the attitude of Paula the Younger whom Melania the Younger rebukes as being prideful and comporting herself with too much of the hauteur of her family and class, and undertook her guidance, to

turn her from Roman pomp to true humility. The fascination in this is in the remembrance that it was Melania who had been brought up in grandeur in the centre of the civilised world and Paula who from an early age had been raised by her saintly aunt Eustochium in humble community life at Bethlehem. Being, as it were, a second generation monastic does not seem to have removed any of the familial inclination to hauteur in this girl; rather, by virtue of her place in the new 'aristocracy of piety', she might have been considered to have still more reason to indulge it. It is illuminating also how automatic the assumption is that she is to take over from her aunt; Eustochium's death was sudden, when she can hardly have been more than fifty, and Paula was only 18. And yet there was no question for Jerome, the community or her, who was to succeed Eustochium; and 'forlorn and wretched', she was called upon to assume responsibilities beyond her years. [21]

This is a tendency reflected in other foundations, not just those that were the results of the pious empire-building of the high aristocracy. The same strain of associated holiness by kinship is visible in many female community leaders who had not created their domains personally; most of whom we only know from association with more eminent relatives. There is a great sorority of women leading convents who were relatives of great patristic writers - it is surely no coincidence that they tend to end up as the superior of their establishment, if not placed there as such originally. When Antony withdrew from the world, he placed his sister in a 'house of virgins', of which she afterwards became the superior. Pachomius placed one of the two communities he created, the Tabennisi foundation, under his sister. Ambrose's strong-minded sister took to the female version of the cloth before he did and headed her own House Community, not hindered subsequently, one imagines, by Ambrose's eminence in the same field. Augustine's sister also headed her community, which, following the best

aristocratic models was then passed on to the leadership of his niece; it is after the family leadership ends that the community falls into disorder, as we know from Augustine's harrassed letters to it. Palladius related that Isidore of Alexandria's sisters had a community of seventy virgins. Early in the sixth century, Caesarius of Arles' sister Caesaria similarly headed a community, which also was passed on to the authority of their respective niece, also called Caesaria. Sulpicius Severus, perhaps lacking closer female connections, relied on his mother-in-law, Bassula, to run the female end of things at Primuliacum. Having often been 'placed' in these positions by interested parties, these women do not merit so much wooing by their distinguished relatives and concomitantly figure less in our source material, though we may fairly assume that they were just as authoritative, and probably more efficient, if we may read this into Jerome and Eustochium taking lessons from the systems employed by Pachomius and presumably his sister. [22]

Monastic women at work

The proper end for their officially canvassed activities would seem to have been their ministry to their own sex: exercising the functions of teaching, lecturing, catechizing and administering assistance prior to baptism were quite proper when the objects of these services were other women. Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger and Olympias are duly attested instructing and converting notable women (and their maidservants) and catechizing women and preparing them for baptism. [23] However, these were not the respects in which these women were exceptional. I shall consider later how, indeed, we gain more information about monastic habits and problems from the less closely observed women of lower rank who find their way to positions of authority; who were at least their equal, if not more prominent in these - more everyday - spheres of monastic authority. So the areas we should

consider specifically, for which these more exalted examples of the genre of monastic headship are distinctive, are the practical extents of their influence outside their specific, definable areas of control; how much the (not inconsiderable) licence for interference they display is due to their singular position and personal qualities, and how much of it is provided for within the official scope of their 'job-descriptions'.

They frequently demonstrate, for instance, a great tendency to dominate the church functionaries - and, conversely, a great ability to resist being directed by those representing the church. Melania the Elder was instrumental in healing a festering Antiochan schism, according to Palladius, assisting in the 'edification' of 'some 400 monks in all, and winning over every heretic that denied the Holy Spirit [Melania and Rufinus] brought him to the Church'; furthermore 'without offending anyone'. This is a sideswipe at Jerome, who accredited her with a malign influence in the Origenist dispute he conducted with Rufinus - a sign of the extent he accorded her influence. Palladius is a further witness that she did not scruple at lecturing officials of the church in a manner which owed but little respect for their inherently superior status as being men and ordained: as we have seen, she hectored Jovinus, then a deacon, subsequently bishop of Ascalon, 'a devout and learned man' when she caught him, as she regarded it, indulging himself with a wash in hot weather. She also had a short way with backsliders. When Evagrius Ponticus fell out of health and political favour seemingly as a result of an illicit affair of the heart, Palladius credits Melania with healing his mental and physical anguish:

> When the physicians were at a loss and could find no way of cure, the blessed Melania said to him; "Son, your long illness does not please me. Tell me therefore what are your thoughts. For this illness of yours does not come from God." Then he confessed to her the whole matter. But she said to him: "Give me your word before the Lord that you will keep to the

> mark of the monastic life; and, sinner though I am, I will pray that you may be granted a furlough of life." And he consented. So within a few days he got well, and he arose and received a change of clothes [i.e. clerical, which he had abandoned] at the hands of the lady herself and went away and exiled himself in the mount of Nitria, which is in Egypt. [24]

Olympias by contrast was related to have 'addressed priests reverently, and honoured bishops'. For all this, she defied Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, in defence of her adored Chrysostom, receiving monks expelled by him and holding herself and her Community in secession from communion with John's replacement as bishop of Constantinople, Arsacius. Nectarius, bishop of Constantinople, 'was completely persuaded by her even in matters of the church' - for financial considerations amongst others. Albina and Melania the Younger resist all attempts at direction from the upstart bishop of Hippo, when his congregation attempt to compel them to remain there. They take little notice of his and Bishop Alypius' contention that their vow, albeit made under duress, should compel them to stay, and in their letters to him do not hesitate to take what, from the wounded tone of Augustine's replies is a very strong line, even to the extent of vilifying him in the locality. [25]

This attitude is manifestly one of the advantages of their 'Eigenkirchen' stance: they evidently consider themselves comparable in terms of a God-given authority to any mere appointed functionary. The only men of God they do accord respect as being more evidently directed by God than they (having made nothing of the claims of such as Evagrius, Theodosius and Augustine in this respect) were the great hermits and coenobites of the deserts: themselves operating from outside the church hierarchy. These were, seemingly, the only ones able to seriously withstand their highhandedness, and indeed, their openhandedness - and manifestly perplex them by so doing. The standard-bearers of a Christianity truer to its original conception, and the very folk that

these women were more concerned to impress, they distinguished themselves by most sturdily, and most successfully evading the gilded cage of aristocratic adoption where mainstream clerics swiftly knuckled the forehead when faced with the sway and resources of a member of the Ceionii. In vain did the Melanias try to buy coenobitic approval. Pambo is manifestly unimpressed by Melania the Elder, and by her obvious pride in the extent of her alms:

> I remained standing, expecting to be honoured or glorified by him because of my gift, but hearing nothing from him, I said to him: "That you may know, Sir, how much there is, it amounts to three hundred pounds [of silver]." But he without even raising his head answered me: "...If you had given it to me, you would have done well to tell me; but if it was to God, who did not scorn the two obols, then be silent."

He compounded the lesson by leaving her a basket on his death as '"I have nothing else to leave you."' Even more gallingly fared her granddaughter with Abba Hephestion when she begged him to receive a little gold from her hands. 'Being told brusquely that he could do nothing with it', she looked round his cell and saw that indeed he possessed nothing but his mat, a basket of dry biscuits and a little basket of salt; amazed and 'profoundly moved by the inexplicable, heavenly richness of the saint', she made haste to rectify his blessed state by hiding some gold in his salt before hastening away. Not a little annoyed when he discovered this (many of the Desert Fathers fled from gold as from poison, believing, not unnaturally, that worry over valuables was destructive of their contemplative peace of mind),

> the man of God ran after them, holding out the gold and shouting, "What am I supposed to do with this?" The blessed Melania said to him, "Give it to those in need." But he insisted that he could neither keep it nor distribute it, for the good reason that the area was a desert and he would be unable to find there anyone in need.

- those who were in that wilderness presumably being deemed to share his attitude. Being quite unable to persuade Melania of this or get her to take back her gold, he made his point still more eloquently by throwing it in the river. Melania Junior proved herself not quite as apt a pupil

in this respect as her grandmother (who used herself to tell the Pambo story to her own discomfort) and went on surreptitiously leaving deposits of money 'using spiritual subterfuge' in the cells of 'many other holy anchorites and pious virgins who did not wish to accept anything' for 'she considered indeed that it was as much a spiritual profit and a very great benefit for the soul, as to succour the saints by this means' - regardless of what they wished. Small wonder Augustine, Alypius and Aurelius were so anxious to persuade her and Pinianus that their fortunes were better off being used to endow churches and monasteries rather than to feed the poor. Even if Christ did say 'what ye do for the least of these, ye have also done for me', the bishops' advice was 'if you give money to the poor, it is gone again tomorrow. If you give revenue to a monastery, you will endow it permanently'. [26]

However, the advantage of their unconscious retention of world-based arrogance was that these women could and would mobilise equally formidable and irresistible powers in defence of the clergy - particularly 'their' clergy, just as the monastic foundations were 'their' foundations. In the insecure world of the time, the life of a cleric was particularly hazardous, since as well as the dangers of a variety of marauding hordes, not least their own peasantry, they were also liable to be hauled into a church squabble and have to flee even safe environs. Thus Pambo, Paphnutius, Isidore and companions might have cocked a properly unimpressed snook at Melania the Elder's materialistic preoccupations when she first appeared, but they soon had need of her material possessions when the prefect of Alexandria banished them and various others to Palestine and she 'followed them and ministered to them from her own money...servants being forbidden them... wearing the dress of a young slave she brought them in the evenings what they required'. Hosts of clergy from Constantinople and its environs

similarly were dependent on Olympias for their subsistance:

> She did more to maintain the blessed Nectarius - so much so that he even took her advice in ecclesiastical affairs - and I need not mention Amphilochius, Optimus, Gregorius, Peter the brother of Basil, and Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus, those saints to whom she actually made gifts of land and money. When Optimus was dying in Constantinople, she closed his eyes with her own hands. Besides these, she generously provided everything they required for the wretched Antiochus, Acacius, and Severianus; and, to put it briefly, for every priest who visited the city, and a host of ascetics and virgins

- earning herself a rebuke by Chrysostom for giving too rashly: 'I applaud your intentions; but would have you know that those who aspire to the perfection of virtue ought to distribute their wealth with prudence. You, however, have been bestowing wealth on the wealthy, which is as useless as if you had cast it in the sea'. The prudence this presumably engendered enabled her to donate to him for his church '10,000 pounds of gold, 20,000 of silver and all her real estate from the provinces of Thrace, Galatia, Cappadocia Prima and Bithynia'. The anonymous Life of Olympias, Deaconess also states that she gave him all the rest of her property, 'including her interest in the public bread supply' - but as with Jerome's statements of absolute largesse, this should not be taken too literally, since she was still manifestly well able to provide for his own subsequent needs 'after he was banished, and those with him' after falling into dispute with the Empress and a powerful faction in the Byzantine church. Even Theophilus the bishop of Alexandria, who had been in the main responsible for John's deposition, and incurred her subsequent enmity afterwards had had recourse to Olympias' charity: 'How often do you suppose he kissed Olympias' knees when he hoped to get money from her, the woman whom he now reviles; while she threw herself upon the ground in vexation, and shed tears at such things being done by a bishop.' [27]

Nor was financial the only kind of support Chrysostom received from Olympias while in exile. She was one of his main instruments in his manoeuvring and kept him informed, in contact with his allies, and acted as his right arm. From his letters reporting the gist of what she has said (hers in their actual form, typically do not survive) we know that she kept him in contact with the Bishop of Mesopotamia, passed on letters he wanted circulated in Constantinople, sought his advice about the attempt to make the bishop of Ephesus resign and she had to play for time when the Goths demanded that a new bishop be appointed: she was, in fact, a key agent in Chrysostom's political manoeuvrings while in exile. For this is the other side to the dynamic leadership exercised by pious aristocratic women: armed with their moral righteousness, they could sally unconcernedly into battle with formidable authorities in the knowledge that when they took up the cudgels for a foray into the men's preserve of public affairs, because of their special motivation they would receive approbation, not vilification, for their unwomanliness. To be 'manly' was the patristic authors' highest accolade for matronae. It was accorded, for instance, to Olympias, who though a 'modest woman', seems to have had little difficulty in outfacing the authorities. Besides the above activities, she was also summoned as a witness and then tried by the prefect of Constantinople in connection with the fire in the cathedral, on which occasion she took the offensive, asserting, 'my past life ought to avert all suspicion from me', and insisting that if he had any real proof 'you ought to appear as our accuser instead of sitting as our judge'. Her obduracy triumphed in this and the prefect 'adopted another tone' and tried by persuasion to at least prevent her and her ladies from seceding from communion with the bishop:

> All [the ladies] deferred to the advice of the prefect with the exception of Olympias, who said to him, "It is not just that, after having been publicly calumniated, without having had anything proved against me, I should be obliged to clear myself of charges totally unconnected with the original question. Let me take counsel concerning the original accusation that has been preferred against me. For, even if

> you resort to unlawful compulsion, I will not hold communion with those from whom I ought to secede, nor consent to anything that is contrary to the principles of piety." The prefect, finding that he could not prevail upon her to hold communion with Arsacius, dismissed her that she might consult with the advocates. [28]

Palladius links Melania the Elder and Olympias in his narrative, as in his statement of their manliness in defence of the Truth; and in this, they show the same tendencies. Melania, summoned to account for tending to the Nitrian priests exiled by the prefect of Alexandria, makes a redoubtable figure.

> The consular of Palestine got to know of it, and wishing to fill his pocket, thought he would terrify her. And having arrested her, he threw her into prison, ignorant that she was a lady. But she told him: "For my part, I am So-and-So's daughter and So-and-So's wife, but I am Christ's slave. And do not despise the cheapness of my clothing. For I am able to exalt myself if I like, and you cannot terrify me in this way or take any of my goods. So then I have told you this, lest through ignorance you should incur judicial accusations. For one must, in dealing with insensate people be as audacious as a hawk."

She too won the day, resoundingly: the judge, 'recognizing the situation', made hasty and advisable reparation, and 'both made an apology and honoured her, and gave orders that she should succour the saints without hindrance'. [29]

Melania the Younger exercised a degree of dominance over the temporal authorities too. When in 436 her uncle Volusian (her mother's brother) invited her to the imperial court in Constantinople for the wedding of the Western Emperor Valentinian III to Eudoxia, daughter of the Eastern Emperor Theodosius II, she accepted, in the first instance with the plan of converting her still pagan uncle, according to Gerontius - Peter Brown suggests she may have had more pragmatic motives such as assisting with a dynastic marriage, just as Volusianus may have had more pragmatic reasons than her inspirational presence for his ultimate conversion, such as the fear of forcible conversion by Theodosius. Once in Constantinople, however, Melania did not scruple to throw herself into the thick of the religious strife of the city,

gathering about her a circle of women from the court 'and other persons of great brilliance and culture' whom she instructed in orthodox theology, against the heresy of Nestorius, enlisting the support of Lausus, chamberlain to Theodosius (a notably pious man, he was also the dedicatee of Palladius' Lausiac History) and at some stage winning the friendship of the Empress Eudocia. Subsequent to this, when Eudocia fulfilled her vow to go to the Holy Land on pilgrimage after her daughter's wedding, Melania was the obvious person to act as her guide, journeying to Sidon to meet the Empress and conducting her back to and around Jerusalem, including around her own foundations - now in need of another cash injection to support her new martyrium where a community of monks could chant perpetual praises - before escorting her back to Caesarea. Melania exercised a kind of state-sanctioned asceticism that still had its connections with the outside world; manifesting in this more influence than her cousin Paula the Younger, who, though her social equal and of equivalent status as a religious, is not attested as being involved in the imperial visit, though she is back in evidence in Melania's deathbed scene. Melania may have rebuked Paula's pride, but her own pretensions to worldly power were considerably more in evidence. [30]

This was a visible altering of the accepted status quo. Women in this position, portrayed as the servants of God, were pursuing service of a kind that barely merits the name; they were, in fact, manifesting a talent for fulfilling a public and social role of maximum visibility. They all seem to achieve a kind of legitimacy according to their chroniclers because of becoming endowed with definable positions arguing legitimate authority; all the accounts of them are written from hindsight of their official ministries as foundresses of established communities. But they all manifest exactly these talents for authoritativeness equally before attaining these 'ranks', when they had

no more status than any of the pious sightseers who could be equally imperious - such as the tribune's wife we have seen hailing Abba Hilarion out of his isolation, and the arrogant 'senatorial virgin' to whom Arsenius gave such a reprimand for insisting on seeing him after being given his refusal. There can be little doubt that being, in the last analysis, under vows, obtained support for the kind of enterprises that otherwise would have been difficult to carry off with ecclesiastical approval.

Non-aristocratic ministries

Community headship

This must bring us to a consideration and comparison of women who exercised leading roles in communities, but of a non-dynamic, non-creative kind, and so who were less high-profile; women who were neither owners of extensive property, nor sisters, aunts, nieces or mothers-in-law of famed ecclesiastics, but who still, from relatively humble backgrounds, and with nothing but themselves to attract attention, make it into the sources. Unsurprisingly, a number of them are from the Desert-based sources, who are fascinated with the ability of the little man - and woman - to create sweetness in the wilderness: the Apophthegmata Patrum in all its various incarnations, the Historia Monachorum, and the ubiquitous Palladius. Knowing little about how such women had attained their positions, or the qualifications deemed suitable for leadership if one did not preempt the question by founding the establishment oneself, we can yet gain valuable insight into female ecclesiastical 'employment' as provided by conventual life at this time by examining the functions and concerns of these more typical monastic women, less likely to be interrupted by miraculous events, literary controversies or royal visitations.

High amongst these rank Amma Theodora and Amma Syncletica; although everyday monastics, they are unparalleled in our sources for having what purports to be their own words - the teaching of women - preserved by men. This must be entered into with reservations, for their testimony comes from the Apophthegmata, the Sayings of the fathers, the product of 'an essentially fluid and changing tradition' which were passed on through many hands and memories with accretions and wrong attributions, being regarded primarily for spiritual edification rather than a true historic witness to the sayings of a given person. However, for us it is more than significant that in even these unreliable conditions, the teaching of three women was deemed to be edifying, and worthy of representation and collection under their own names. The third is Amma Sarah, who as a solitary is even more unprecedented, and will be considered in a separate context, while Theodora and Syncletica were at least familiar and identifiable in their role as abbesses of convents of nuns; it may be significant that in this position they seem to have been the confidante and advisor of monks, whereas Sarah, taking on a spiritual task much heavier - and very rare in women - for all that her sayings were preserved, evidently attracted a certain amount of hostile attention.

Theodora may be identifiable with the woman of the same name mentioned by Palladius, 'the wife of a tribune, who reached such a depth of poverty that she became a recipient of alms, and finally died in the monastery of Hesychias near the sea'. Certainly the Theodora of the Sayings was a woman of education, and the product of a well-to-do background. Her sayings reflect a wider world than is displayed by many of the abbas, numbers of whom originated from the illiterate Egyptian peasantry, in whose company the indulgences displayed by such as Arsenius 'the Roman' were noted as standing out, and whose sayings were more concerned with everyday exigencies of nourishment, work and the

passions. In the sayings attributed to Theodora, we find a scriptural question to the combative Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria; a saying about the difference in the teaching of Christians and Manichees concerning the body; and references to 'a monk who had been rich' and 'sitting at a table where there are many courses'. Theodora's position seems to have been one of a widely accessible and wide-ranging teacher and sage. A number of questions she answers were put to her by 'an old man' (the generic name for the desert-dwelling monastic), many of whom she evidently counselled; monks figure largely in the instructional tales she told. Her subject matter includes analyses of the ascetic life, theological insights on the body, resurrection, and humility, and pronouncements on the rationale for teaching and the qualities of mind necessary in a teacher: patience, humility, a lack of desire for domination and vainglory - above all, 'he must be tested'. [31]

If Theodora seems to be presiding over a well-bred desert symposium of mixed company, Syncletica speaks to us more from the boundaries of her community, and her sayings are derived from her shrewd, down-to-earth observations upon it. She uses the imagery of the laundry and the infirmary, the market-place and the dinner-table to analyse the trials and temptations of the ascetic life for the benefit of her nuns; and as distinct from Theodora's lofty considerations, there is a more direct and pithy commonsense in Syncletica's pronouncements such as 'do not fill yourself with bread and you will not want wine' and 'when you have to fast, do not pretend you are ill'. She also has a blunt realism about extremist observances: 'Obedience is preferable to asceticism. The one teaches pride and the other humility.' and 'There are many who live in the mountains and behave as though they were in the town and they are wasting their time. It is possible to be a solitary in one's mind while living in a crowd and it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in the crowd of his own thoughts.' She counsels on

disputes and grievances in the tone of one who has settled many such amongst the sisters; on temptation, negligence and moderation as a veteran who has seen many forms of error and indulgence. Syncletica also, like Theodora, has opinions on teaching, and the necessary qualifications for it, which are of a piece with this pragmatism: while Theodora's priorities are suitable qualities of mind, Syncletica considered 'it is dangerous for anyone to teach who has not first been trained in the "practical" life', since while words might lead to salvation, evil behaviour certainly led to downfall. [32]

A few other ammas of this stratum we do know about, although not from the honour of their teachings being preserved. Palladius, being concerned, as he says, to fairly represent the case of women also, since many there were in the desert 'to whom God has apportioned labours equal to those of men', carefully presents some personalities as exemplars amongst his generalities about the communities of women: some of the things he says about them being far more revealing about the state of community life when it was not so exemplary. It is illuminating what he finds most notable about the convent of Amma Talis, for instance: she was

> an old woman who had spent eighty years in asceticism, as she and the neighbours told me. With her dwelt sixty young women who loved her so greatly that no key even was fixed on the outer wall of the monastery, as in other monasteries, but they were kept in by love of her.

This was evidently an impressive feat in the head of a convent and worth highlighting. Egeria also gives us another abbess at work, in her Pilgrimage; indeed, this woman is the only person she mentions by name rather than by function, and evidently with great affection: this is 'my very dear friend, the holy deaconess Marthana, to whose life everyone in the East bears witness' who governs the monastic cells of 'holy monastics or apotactites, both men and women' at, significantly, the martyrium of St. Thecla near Seleucia. Egeria is writing to assure

her sisters of the particular devotion that is paid to St. Thecla still, and of someone who, half a world away, 'is carrying on the living tradition of an ecclesiastical woman with authority and responsibility as are they'. Possibly, Marthana is specially noticed because she is the only person in the journal that Egeria considers a friend and a colleague and an ecclesiastical equal. [33]

In this connection exists also another variety of dedicated life of some relevance in the question of the monastic life giving women legitimate authority; the 'anti-social' holy women, those living in seclusion as hermits and solitaries, either in the wilderness in proper Desert fashion, or within their own homes. Accepting Michael Whitby's analysis of the 'anti-social holy man' [34], who was seen as fulfilling a ministry even though reluctant and misanthropic, I consider the same tendencies were shown and expectations raised of the household nuns and anchoresses; so that they merit inclusion at this point. Those fulfilling the life of the solitary in their own homes form the category of what I shall refer to as the household communities: those who lived something of the lifestyle of, and often fulfilled the functions of a conventual life while not living in a foundation as such. Sometimes still at large within the community, but more often retiring to live in seclusion in their own households, being thus neither a conventual as such nor a solitary, and yet occupying a curious half-way position between the two - this was one of the earliest forms of leading a consecrated life before state sanction of the church made it less hazardous to start banding together for mutual support. Some of these indeed lived in small domestic or familial groups, but since they were not constituted as an attempt at Community life, open to outsiders and ultimately accorded a Rule and a head, I shall differentiate by thus referring to them as household communities.

Besides those we have already encountered such as those run by Marcella and Marcellina, there are numerous instances in our sources of women who 'cultivated solitude and would meet no one' but who 'practised virtue ardently and scrupulously', 'in seclusion', 'in her house': Palladius chronicles any number of them, Piamoun, Magna, Juliana, by name, besides a host of anonymous virgins who hid fugitive clerics, hid themselves, gave inspiration or material benefits or sometimes prophecy to their community, or exercised spiritual pride, or avarice, or fell from grace. We know more about the observances of the Roman women practising this kind of life such as Marcella's circle, whose regime was chronicled by Jerome. But we can use them as a model, because it is fair to assume the humiliores acted as a model for them since, as we have observed, the aristocratic women, though the most publicised, were not the first to adopt these lifestyles, but followed the impulse for asceticism already in existence and percolating through from the lower levels of society. It is therefore reasonable to infer that, just so they would have adopted and adapted the practices of the classes whom Palladius attests to have been leading this life early enough for one of them to have given sanctuary to Origen. They seem, then, to have lived in a fairly severe regime: all trace of creature comforts was banished, putting aside fair clothing and cosmetics for coarse, squalid dress, shunning bathing and sleeping on hard mats on the floor, and stringent and continuous fasts. The seclusion was broken only by secret visits, often made at night, to martyrs' tombs or basilicas for worship, though in some cases even this was denied, as in the virgin noted in Chapter 3 who had not appeared in public for 25 years and was taken to task by Abba Serapion for being isolated through spiritual pride. Some more conspicuously failed in the standards: Palladius indicates some such as bad examples, such as the household nun that he refers to simply as 'The rich virgin' whose reeducation from avarice Macarius of Alexandria took in hand, and several household virgins who 'fell'. [35]

But of humbler women who achieved this standard and status, quietly and unsung, there were many examples, often noticed by only a line in passing, to let us know that it was possible for many such as these, not even known by name often enough; that such-and-such a woman 'wore sackcloth and shut herself up in a cell' or 'lived with her mother eating every other day' or 'was a neighbour of mine, but I did not see her face, for she never came out, so they say, from the day she renounced the world. But she...completed sixty years of asceticism in company with her mother'. One more active example of her genre, Magna, demonstrates the kind of useful employment that could be found by a woman so motivated, in her own community; of more use probably than the majority of secluded conventuals. After the death of the husband forced on her by her mother, she

> gave herself wholly to God, attending in a most serious spirit to her own houses, living a most ascetic and continent life, having her conversation such that the very bishops revered her for the excellence of her religion. While she provided for the needs, primary and secondary, of hospitals, the poor and bishops on tour, she ceased not to work in secret with her own hands and by means of her most faithful servants, and at nights she did not leave the church.

In this instance, it is probably significant that Magna is a widow - or, rather another virgin-widow like Olympias - at all events, sui iuris and evidently used to handling her own property; and she bent herself, her devotion and her resources to the assistance of her local community. But we have seen Piamoun in Chapter 3 as an example of an enclosed household virgin serving her community equally materially by prophecy of natural disasters and prayerful protection. In this, Magna and Piamoun in their different ways are conspicuously of more use than Marcella, or Serapion's virgin, or Palladius' neighbour who never saw the light of day, who held themselves aloof from their surroundings, devoting themselves rather to the necessities of the next life - but there is no suggestion that Magna and Piamoun fail in this respect through being more actively involved in community service - rather the reverse in the

case of Magna, whom 'the very bishops revered for the excellence of her religion'. [36]

The Anchoresses

There was, then, an ambivalence as to the proper end for a consecrated female; contemplative or active, Mary or Martha - Asella or Paula. Nor was this solely a problem for the women: it was the counterpart of the current debate in the male devotional circles over proper priorities. This was the source of divergence amongst ecclesiastics in general; many were the snide comments found in the more austere sources to the effect that it was difficult to listen to secular speech and live for God alone, which may be taken as a prod at metropolitan bishops and clergy, who would be compelled to do just that: and we find men of sensitive conscience such as Evagrius and Arsenius abandoning the haunts of men and the active part of their ministry as being the source of temptation. But while this may have been accepted as still necessary among the generality of the clergy, though sneered at by the desert dwellers, the debate raged most fiercely within monastic circles as to whether you could be a true monk while maintaining connections with temporal life; whether the fittest way to serve God was to assist his creatures on earth or to secede and attempt the perfection of one of them in oneself. On this score we find even writers with roughly the same background and world view showing a similar ambivalence. The anonymous monastic collectors of the Apophthegmata Patrum relate the tale of three friends, two of them active, in healing divisions and visiting the sick respectively, the other a contemplative 'in prayer and stillness in the desert'. In their case, the judgement handed down is that the third brother is living the best monastic life: the first two find their labours impossible and disheartening, and go together to the third brother, who instructs them that 'for those who live among men, disturbances prevent them from seeing their faults. But

when a man is still, especially in the desert, then he sees his failings'. In the same anonymous collection we subsequently find, advanced as equally edifying, the completely contradictory standpoint:

> A brother questioned an old man, saying, "here are two brothers. One of them leads a solitary life for six days a week, giving himself much pain, and the other serves the sick. Whose work does God accept with greater favour?" The old man said, "Even if the one who withdraws from the world were to hang himself up by his nostrils, he could not equal the one who serves the sick." [37]

It is in this context that the divergence between the women who were active in the community and those who withdrew to look into their own centre should be understood; they met with equally conflicting advice, the former drawing the censure of the rigorists such as Jerome that they went abroad too readily, and ministered as a cover for an imperfect life, the latter incurring the implicit criticism accorded by Serapion, that such solitude led to a completely self-oriented worship and a tendency to spiritual pride.

Many women, however, did absorb this ideal of complete isolation before God and become as noted proponents as the men of the most extreme tendency of eremitism, the way of the Solitary: we must now examine the ministry of the anchoresses. That this was indeed a popular life-choice is indicated by the many examples we have of these, both those identified and with known histories and of the many passing references to individuals. And yet frequency of occurrence is no indicator of the ease of the path: on the contrary, their evidence is presented in such a way that it is clear that this was for women an odd and difficult choice and the woman solitary a <u>res miranda</u>.

In the first instance, the numbers of them who were taken for males, and who deliberately fostered this idea about themselves argues a great need to hide their sex if embarking on this lifestyle. The harlot Pelagia, for instance, in the great penance imposed on her by Nonnus, bishop and Tabennisiot monk, immediately following her baptism fled

secretly in male attire borrowed from Nonnus, 'went to Jerusalem and built herself a cell on the Mount of Olives' and achieved no small fame in the locality as 'a certain brother Pelagius, a monk and a eunuch, who has lived there for some years shut up alone' and 'wrought so many wonders'. When James the Deacon, the writer of her life was sent there years afterwards at the instance of Nonnus, who was privy to the secret all along, he failed to recognise her when he saw her first, for 'how could I have known her again, with a face so emaciated by fasting? It seemed to me that her eyes had sunk inward like a great pit.' He then discovered her death a few days after and alerted the neighbourhood. The first reaction of her neighbours and colleagues in Christ to her true status is illuminating:

> They carried out his sacred little body as if it had been gold and silver they were carrying. When the fathers began to anoint his body with myrrh, they realised it was a woman. They wanted to keep such a wonder hidden, but they could not, because of the crowds of people thronging round, who cried out with a loud voice, "Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for you have hidden away on earth such great treasures, women as well as men." So it was known to all the people.

Pelagia is unusual in the detail we have of her: but her story represents a pattern of its kind, the hidden woman whom the monks arrive just in time to bury and discover the truth, the tale told purportedly by eyewitnesses or the monks involved. Bessarion and his disciple Doulas, as told by Doulas, while on their way to visit John of Lycopolis came upon a cave in which they found 'a brother sitting and making a plait of palm-leaves; and he would not look at us or greet us or speak with us at all'. Returning by the same route, they determined to visit again and see if the anchorite would be moved to speech:

> When we entered, we found him dead. The old man said to me, "Come, brother, let us take the body; it is for this purpose that God has sent us here." When we took the body to bury it, we perceived that it was a woman. Filled with astonishment, the old man said, "See how the women triumph over the devil in the desert while we still behave badly in the towns." And having given thanks to God...we went away.

The anonymous Sayings unemotionally record another example. Except for

this one divergence the tale is in itself typical in all respects of the experience of the desert monk; hence suggestive of the similarities between the male and female suffering in extreme ascesis:

> Some seculars visited an anchorite, and when he saw them he received them with joy, saying "The Lord sent you so that you would bury me. For my call is at hand, but for your benefit and that of other hearers, I shall tell you about my life. I, brothers, am a virgin in both body and soul, and up to now, I have been inhumanly tempted by fornication. Indeed, as I speak to you, I behold the angels waiting to take my soul, and Satan meanwhile standing by and suggesting lustful thoughts to me." Having said these things, he stretched himself out and died. While dressing him the seculars found that he was in fact a woman.

Some of these women indeed carried out the deception so successfully that a recurring problem amongst this kind of monastic acquires new piquancy in being applied to them: the incidence of female 'brothers' being accused of impregnating local maidens. A detailed history of one such case concerns one Maria, who did not merely disguise her sex to be an anchorite but successfully infiltrated a male community with the help of her father who became a monk. When sent out to beg for the house, Maria (now renamed Maryana) became the victim of one of these almost formulaic accusations by one of the local girls of which we find so many examples in the Desert Fathers (not all baseless), who, seduced by a man of her village, told her father 'it was the monk who seduced me'. Her father and Maryana's community believed her and Maryana was refused admittance to the monastery when 'he' returned from 'his' wanderings. Following this, Maryana proved her fitness for inclusion into the austere brothership by displaying the extremes of self-abasement proper to the desert-dweller: she took on herself unresisting the burden of guilt and opprobrium, accepted the charge, and, ultimately, the baby as her own, and did penance at the door of the monastery for four years until deemed worthy of readmittance. In this, she manifests an entirely proper ascetic attitude: we have tales of other desert monastics gladly accepting the blame and doing extravagant penance for crimes they had not committed, merely rejoicing in the chance of waging a doughtier

struggle for the faith. Maryana's 'sin' is more preposterous, but that makes her all the fitter for the life by her unhesitating acceptance of it and the responsibility, since in the desert mentality, the chance to struggle was seen as a privilege accorded those who were stronger in the faith. So her actions are consistent, she even after her reacceptance declining to prove her colleagues wrong but persisting for the rest of her life in her penance for her 'crime': in formulaic fashion, they discover the mistake only after her death to general astonishment and edification and the remorse of the accuser. [38]

The most obvious reason for the switch is, of course the risk. Being lone in an already hostile environment carried hazards that were accepted as part of the testing of the soul; doing so as a female would guarantee extra unwanted attention. Paphnutius was directed by heavenly insight to seek out a former brigand of reformed life; amongst other incidences of piety, 'Once in his days as a brigand, he rescued a nun who was about to be raped by a gang of robbers and at night led her back to her village.' And the many church councils promulgating edicts to decide the status of nuns and anchoresses who had been raped indicate the commonplace nature of the problem amongst those consecrated women who retained their skirts, even those living in comparative safety in community life. To present oneself as a sitting target by being a female solitary must have required a more than ordinarily firm resolution in the life. We have evidence of a probably reasonably common solution in the case of the anchoress Patermuthius (before his conversion) attempted to rob, who lived in a hermitage alone, but near to a community of priests with a church. The anchoresses' vulnerability to rape and pillage, however, did not by much distinguish them from their male colleagues who witnessed, or suspected each other of, similar assaults on boys, and who told cheerful homilies about assisting robbers to denude themselves of their own few possessions. But if not alone in

this, the female solitaries certainly had a problem that their male colleagues did not have that adds greater moment to the need to disguise their sex: a truculent attitude towards female solitaries from those who ought to have known better, their own colleagues in the life. That Bessarion's attitude of edified admiration that a woman could achieve where his brethren were failing, was not typical we can learn from the case of Amma Sarah, the anchoress who achieved the accolade of her place in the Apophthegmata. Sarah's life was a model one, according to the Sayings. 'It was said concerning her that for 60 years she lived beside a river and never lifted her eyes to look at it.' Despite this and a prolonged struggle against sexual temptation Sarah had to add to her other trials hostility from her male colleagues.

> Another time, two old men, great anchorites, came to the district of Pelusium to visit her. When they arrived, one said to the other, "Let us humiliate this old woman." So they said to her, "Be careful not to become conceited, thinking to yourself: 'Look how anchorites are coming to see me, a mere woman.'" But Amma Sarah said to them, "According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts."

The weary tone of another of her sayings indicates that male truculence was something she frequently endured: 'If I prayed God that all men should approve of my conduct, I should find myself a penitent at the door of each one, but I shall rather pray that my heart may be pure towards all'. In addition, 'She also said to the brothers: "It is I who am a man, and you who are women."' The self-deprecating willingness to learn from a fellow-fighter who happened to be female that we find in Bessarion and in Maryana's community is little in evidence here; perhaps Bessarion was the exception and the attitude of the monks around Sarah and those that tried to cover up the embarrassing truth about Pelagia was more the kind of attitude women attempting to become solitaries could expect, in which case their decision to stay in male attire, or simply as much out of sight as possible becomes even more cogent. Benedicta Ward says of Sarah's example 'Sarah was accepted, but it is clear that to achieve this, she had in effect to become a man'. In fact

this is far from clear: the significant thing about Sarah is that she precisely did not 'become a man' as did all those 'brothers' who turned out to have been women all along; she is clearly identifiable as a woman being a solitary, which is why she was not readily accepted, but given rigorous testing. Ward also regards the option to don male attire as symbolic of the transcendence of gender that went with the liberation of anachoreisis, 'thus by implication a liberation in itself; I consider that Pelagia and the others who achieved anonymity by means of this route more simply found it a device of liberation from unwanted notice by their colleagues. [39]

There was also however, a great sub-category of women fulfilling this kind of lifestyle for special reasons, whose motives gain them the full support and approval of their male colleagues, at whose instigation, often enough, they were acting: these were the great penitents, the reformed courtesans performing their expiation for having led so many other souls to their downfall. Their stories, too, become formulaic in character: the woman famed in beauty and notorious in morals leading many souls to doom until brought by one strong, persevering holy man to a cognizance of their own likely end whereon they adopt the most extravagant penances which are the wonder of all beholders. However, their stories are different enough in detail that something survives of the real women behind them, particularly when, as is the case with Pelagia and Mary, the niece of Abraham, the writer of the story has been intimately concerned with it. Also instructive are the subtly different treatments each meets with in each case. The stories of Pelagia, Thais and the unnamed courtesan in the Apophthegmata's story of Serapion all commence the same way, and it has been postulated that in fact Serapion was Thais' converter, rather than Paphnutius as in the Life of Thais the Harlot, and that this was in fact the same story: in which case the advice described as meted out to her

is even more interesting as it so vastly differs in each version. In these cases, the woman appears at the start as the classic temptress, wilfully putting others at risk. Each is convinced by the words of the relevant holy man and out of their conviction, of their own will ask for penance. Serapion conducts his harlot to a convent of virgins and says to the sister in charge: 'Take this sister and do not put any yoke or commandment on her as on the other sisters, but if she wants something give it to her and allow her to walk where she wishes.' The penitent herself then asks for gradually harder regimes to be given to her - eating only every second day, then every fourth day, until at her own request she is enclosed completely in a cell and given a only little food and work through the window. Pelagia simply disappears, to general distress, the night after her baptism, until she is discovered in death disguised as an anchorite, as related above. The implication is that Nonnus has given her her choice in working out her own expiation with his loving advice and help. Thais' fate is worked out with considerably less volition on her part and is presented in much starker relief. Paphnutius

> took her into a small cell, sealing the door with lead and leaving only a small opening through which food could be passed to her and he ordered her to be given daily a little bread and a little water by the sisters of the [nearby] monastery. When Thais realised that the door was sealed with lead, she said to him, "Father, where do you want me to urinate?" and he replied, "In the cell, as you deserve." Then she asked how she should pray to God, and he said to her, "You are not worthy to name God, or to take his divine name upon your lips, or to lift up your hands to heaven, for your lips are full of sin and your hands are stained with iniquity; only stand facing towards the east and repeat often only this: "You who have made me, have mercy upon me."

After three years of this, it is not altogether surprising to learn that she was judged worthy of such glory in heaven that the monk envisioning it first assumed that it must have been prepared for Antony himself. Paphnutius promptly went to unseal Thais, who by this time did not wish for release but 'begged to be allowed to be left shut up in there'; again, she was allowed no choice. She died fifteen days after her

enforced release from her enforced incarceration. [40]

Marginally less formulaic, and concomitantly more informative are those women who did not altogether wish their lifestyle on themselves, but whose harlotry may be one way and another laid at the door of the old men who convert them away from it again, earning themselves the plaudits of informed opinion, and their penitents a lifetime of tears, by so doing. The 'prostitute' Paesia, converted to the status of penitent by John the Dwarf had commenced her story as an orphan heiress of charitable disposition, who was reduced to the necessity of selling her body at the instigation of 'some wicked men' when 'her resources were exhausted' as a result of her decision 'to make her house a hospice for the fathers of Scetis'. The fathers, when they at last noticed this, were, not unnaturally, 'deeply grieved'. Abba John duly presented himself on the doorstep with 'something that will be very helpful to her'. Such is the vain nature of woman that she and her maidservant immediately thought in terms of material assistance: 'Those monks are always going about the Red Sea and finding pearls.' But it was reproaches and the remembrance of her former piety that he had brought her. But she is presented as reaping her reward after all: once he had brought her back to her correct priorities and led her in penitence out into the desert where she promptly died, she was seen to go straight to heaven, which was not bad going; 'One single hour of repentance has brought her more than the penances of many who continue without showing such fervour in their repentance'. Maria 'the Harlot', niece of Abraham, examined in Chapter 3 has her place in this genre; she too won free of her years of degradation by such perfect penitence that ultimately she gained not only the assurance of salvation but the power of healing while on earth. [41]

This extraordinary power of penitence demonstrated by these women hitherto steeped in the squalor of complete subjection to bodily sin, able to put them on a par with those of lifelong freedom from the flesh, is of great fascination to the Fathers; the thinking behind this seeming contradiction, however, can be seen addressed on a more theoretical level by Paulinus of Nola. In a letter to Sulpicius Severus, he addressed the question of head covering and modesty, one that the writers of the time all address with regard to womanly demonstrations of piety. This led him onto a discussion of Mary of Magdala, who washed Christ's feet with her hair, along with ointment and tears. She, who has been immodest originally, has her status not just restored, but actually elevated by her humility and repentance, achieving, says Paulinus, remission of sins and the glory of being in the Gospel; and not only this but she is by virtue of this 'worthy to pre-figure the Church that is to be called forth from the Gentiles, bearing within her all the signs of the mystery of salvation' - this for a woman who has proved all too evidently her own subjection to sin through carnality. But through her humbleness and willing subjection to the Lord's judgement she attains glory; 'she anticipated us in taking into her hands and mouth the living, life-giving Bread itself' and is preferred to the Pharisee, that man without sin, for 'she tasted and felt Christ's body' and fasted while he feasted: in sum, 'she deserved to symbolise the Church'. This may represent a metaphor of what might be attained by the devoted woman; a consciousness of sin and subjection properly displayed in conjunction with devotion to the immolatory ideal as the means to achieve more than ordinary standing as a part of the body of the Church. [42]

An illuminating addition in this category is the maid-turned-anchoress Alexandra; she is not a harlot, in fact, and so is evidence that not only the great sinners, but more ordinary women

followed the logic of the fathers in matters of this kind. She judged herself by these same criteria of being a sinful, because fleshly, woman and regarding the cause for temptation in others as a sin in oneself, and imposes a harsh penance on herself by reason of it. She 'having left the city and shut herself up in a tomb, received the necessities of life through an opening, seeing neither men nor women face to face for ten years' and lived out her life 'waiting for my end with cheerful hope' and filling the time spinning flax, praying and meditating 'on the holy patriarchs and prophets and apostles and martyrs'. When Melania the Elder asked her the reason for her lifestyle, 'she called out to me through the opening: "A man was distressed in mind because of me and, lest I should seem to afflict or disparage him, I chose to betake myself alive into the tomb rather than cause a soul made in the image of God to stumble."' [43] These women accept their place in the scheme of things according to the patristic outlook; in abasing themselves and doing extravagant penance for indulging in sexual licence, they are fulfilling the male monastic association of femininity with the body and the sexual, and demonstrating the supplicatory relationship with God that many of the clerics of the time felt most appropriate from women. It is worthwhile remembering Sarah's difficulties in this context. She had no such shameful history, so far as we know - and the monastic writers are keen to tell us of converts from such lifestyles - so that in her ministry, she was coming from a position of strength. This is barely discernible from the confrontational nature of her contacts with the monks: perhaps they were more at ease with more sinful women who were hence constrained to express the abjection felt to be proper to female worship. Sarah was fighting her nature from on a level with the men near her; and seems to have endured their uncomprehending resentment as a consequence.

Something that emerges from studies of these non-elite, uncelebrated holy women is how they too show, in little, some of the same tendencies towards confronting clerics in their more limited periphery as do the upper-class leaders from whom it can be more expected. Women we often do not even have names for - 'a certain virgin', 'a certain widow', or just 'a nun' demonstrate that they too have absorbed the idea that being female need not deter them from showing themselves to be in the right over unwary clerics if they feel they have adequate cause and are in a position to edify. Just as Albina will take Augustine to task and Melania the Elder scold Jovinus as one fighter to another, so Sarah challenges Paphnutius when she finds him to be lacking in discernment: 'she sent someone to say to Abba Paphnutius "Have you really done the work of God by letting your brother be despised?"' and Paphnutius is just as stung as was Augustine: 'Abba Paphnutius said "Paphnutius is here with the intention of doing the work of God and he has nothing to do with anyone else!"' And so, as we have seen, she feels herself able to take on the two old men by virtue of her confidence in her own way of life. An anonymous amma similarly scores off an 'old man'; to the tacit applause of other 'old men', since they included it in the Sayings: 'Meeting some nuns on the road, a monk made a detour. Their superior said to him, "If you were a perfect monk, you would not even have noticed that we were women."' And as a counterpoint to all the stories of clinging mothers importuning their anchorite sons to see them, we have the female consecrated relatives who decline to compromise their dedication by seeing male relatives, even if also consecrated, judging it imprudent:

> A brother went to visit his sister, who lay ill in her convent. She was of great devotion; and being unwilling even to see a man, or to bring her brother temptaton by his coming for her sake into the company of women, she sent him word, saying "Go, my brother and pray for me: for by Christ's grace, I will see you in the kingdom of heaven." [44]

Further, to set against the tales of monks tempted by wanton women and succumbing or resisting, are the tales of women rebuking or holding off monks who solicit them: one such brother who propositioned a washerwoman was told 'listening to you is easy, but I could be the cause for great suffering for you... After committing the deed, your conscience will strike you and either you will give up on yourself, or it will require great effort for you to reach the state which is yours now: therefore, before you experience that hurt, go on your way in peace.' This fairly sophisticated, if somewhat optimistic appraisal did succeed in appealing to his conditioning, and, much struck, he thanked her and went back to his monastery marvelling, and concluding that it would be best never to leave the enclosure again. Another monk was sent on an errand to a devout secular who, as they so often did in these tales, had an attractive daughter by whom he was tempted - she having realised this and 'kept herself from appearing to him' - till he approached her, confessing woefully that he had never been with a woman and 'for that very reason I want to find out what it is like'. She bade him 'stir yourself to pray to God', but 'he did not want to pray'. She then told him 'I am in my menses, and no one can come near me or smell me, because of the odour'. When he recoiled from her in disgust, and came to his senses and wept, she drove the lesson home by urging him to think how he would have faced his monastery, had he sinned: 'Therefore I urge you from now on to be sober, and not to want to destroy those fruits of your labours because of a little weak pleasure.' [45]

Even prostitutes share in righteously rebuking erring holy men. Thais, when Paphnutius first approaches her in the guise of a client has a smart answer ready when he asks 'If there is a more private chamber, let us go in there'; 'She said, "There is one, but if it is people you are afraid of, noone ever enters this room; except, of course for God, for there is no place that is hidden from the eyes of divinity."' She

might have had cause in the following three years to regret her ready tongue. In an Armenian story, a prostitute catches out a desert father and points out to him the moral in a story that is reminiscent of the above rebuke of the nun to the monk:

> When Ephraim went into Edessa for the first time, he prayed to God that as he entered the town he would meet someone who would discuss with him the problems in Holy Scripture. The first person he met, coming straight towards him, was a woman who was a prostitute. Ephraim was sad because he thought that God had not heard his prayer, for what did she know of the Bible? How could she help resolve his questions? But the woman came on, her eyes fixed upon him. He was astonished and said to her, but without impatience or anger, "Why are you looking at me so intently?" The woman replied with a reference to the story in Genesis of the creation of man and woman, "It is natural that I should look at you, for I was formed out of you; but as for you, you have no reason to look at me, for it was the earth from which you were formed and it is on that that your eyes should be fixed." [46]

The deaconesses

We should lastly consider the offices of a category of women who 'took the veil' to exercise authority not by turning their back on the world and all its works, but the reverse; who were accorded clerical rank [ragma] and dignity [axioma] in certain restricted areas (mainly to do with their own sex) within the church setup, a rare place for women to manifest position. These were the deaconesses. They also distinguish themselves by being a category which seems to have included women from the honesti and the humiliores in their ranks. Their position having, in some sort, a job-specification, and that mainly concerned with moral qualities, in theory any woman upright enough qualified; and we can attest as deaconesses notable women from the top drawer of society and socially undistinguished women seemingly drawn from the body of the congregation. The word has its origins in the New Testament usage of 'diakonos' (as used of Phoebe), simply meaning 'servant' or 'helper' and only gradually acquired precise ministerial functions, the nature of which varied from century to century and differed according to Eastern or Western observance. Danielou considers

that the constitution of the actual office of Deaconess was the Church's attempt in the third century to turn the ministry of women into an institution to combat the temptation of greater pay-offs offered to women in the heretical sects, by giving them a 'ministerium' of sorts and entitling them to be listed as ecclesiastical dignitaries; and that once so constituted, they effectively absorbed most of the functions and privileges of the existing order of widows, which declines in importance and activeness in our sources from the third century on, a victim of its own ambiguities as a movement. By the time of the Apostolic Canons, the role of the deaconesses was a distinguished one: they are mentioned after the deacons in the order of church dignitaries and sit to the left of the bishop during the liturgy, parallel to the deacons who sit on his right, and they make their communion first after the deacons. Depending on the location of their church, they might be actually ordained, with the laying on of hands; this was more an Eastern tendency and met with resistance in the West. Where the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon talk in terms of ordination ('Women may not be ordained [cheirotoneisthai] under the age of forty'), the Council of Orange states 'deaconesses should not be in any way ordained'. To qualify for the elevation to near-clerical status, women were carefully scrutinised to fulfil certain requirements: they must be of irreproachable life, known good character and works, possibly only once-married, and once elevated to the dignity of deaconess, vowed to chastity in the same way as a nun; 'if she takes the veil and keeps the ministry, then gives herself in marriage, to the insult of God's grace, she should be anathematized along with him who married her'. There was also, as we have seen, an age qualification; however this might or might not be rigorously applied, at the discretion of the bishop. Olympias shows the aristocratic facility for rendering regulations redundant again in this: 'notwithstanding her youth, Nectarius had ordained her deaconess.' Nectarius, it is worth remembering, was financially beholden to Olympias; it is a moot point

whether such notable piety as Olympias displayed would have been deemed adequate for premature elevation in a woman of lesser background and means. [47]

Their tasks were specifically 'the service of women': in ministry to their own sex, their authority was parallel with that of the deacons. This would comprise pastoral and liturgical duties. The pastoral side would include sick visiting: 'For there are houses where you [the bishop] cannot send the deacon to the women's quarters, because of the unbelievers: there you will send the deaconesses' and 'where Christian women live in the households of unbelievers it is necessary that it should be the deaconess who goes there and visits women who are sick'. They instructed and prepared candidates for baptism and catechism, and assisted at the ceremonies:

> In many other matters besides it is necessary to employ the deaconess. First of all, when women descend into the water for baptism, it is necessary that those who thus descend should be anointed with the oil of unction by the deaconess. When no women, and above all, no deaconesses are available, then it is inevitable that he who performs the baptism should anoint her who is baptized

- the minister would normally only anoint the head, the deaconess having the task of anointing the body of a woman candidate. Then

> When she who is baptized comes out of the water, the deaconess shall receive her, instruct her, and look after her, to the end that the unbreakable seal of baptism may be impressed on her with purity and holiness.

Further in all matters they should be the intermediary between women and the clergy: 'No woman should approach the deacon or the bishop unaccompanied by the deaconess'. Their liturgical functions and duties in the congregation were often those of a mere functionary: 'The doorkeepers should stand at the entries for men, the deaconesses at those for women, as the officials responsible for their orderly movements' and if any woman, rich or poor, is without a place, the deaconess must find her one. [48]

We have many samples of how this would work in practice. When Pelagia, the harlot-penitent of Antioch, embarks on her conversion, the deaconess Romana figures largely in her preparation from first to last. When Pelagia first expresses her desire for baptism and repentance, Nonnus' first act is to send James the Deacon to the bishop of Antioch 'to ask him to send one of his deaconesses back with me... At once he sent back with me the lady Romana, the first of the deaconesses.' She must be present at every stage: at Pelagia's baptism '[Nonnus] was god-parent to her with the lady Romana, and the deaconess received her and took her to the place of the catechumens' and subsequently she takes complete charge of the new convert: Pelagia is tempted by the devil 'two days later when [she] was asleep in her room with the holy Romana her godmother' and when she wishes to communicate with her other godparent 'she sent for holy Nonnus through the holy Romana, her godmother'; when Pelagia subsequently disappears, Romana is attested as being distraught with grief - perhaps at the possibility of her own dereliction of duty - until comforted by Nonnus, who assisted with her disappearance. More evidence is gained from the Life of Saint Macrina. At the death of his sister, Gregory tells us of the rather officious bustling of 'a lady called Lampadion, the leader of the group of sisters, a deaconess in rank' who 'declared she knew Macrina's wishes about burial exactly' and dismissed, with great finality, his mild suggestion that finer clothing on the body would not be wholly amiss. She took charge of the body and the preparations for burial and the behaviour of the sisters at the ceremony. Sozomen tells us of 'a deaconess of the Macedonian sect', one Eusebia, who was the keeper of the martyrium of the Forty Martyrs in Constantinople; an office Marthana, as we have seen, also held conjointly with heading her community. Olympias' authoritativeness as a deaconess was to a large degree idiosyncratic; nonetheless, being a deaconess is evidently an official legitimation of some value, as bugled in the proud title of her

Vita, the Life of Olympias the Deaconess. The teaching and ministry she displays, while rooted in personal importance and influence are justified by her clerical dignity, the church in Constantinople setting the official seal on the actual situation in making her 'leader of the women' as deaconess of the cathedral. It is by virtue of this dignity that she is seen to be 'engaging in much catechizing of unbelieving women', for instance, and converting her household servants, among all her more typically ascetic actions. Indeed, Constantinople seems to have been endowed with a multitude of deaconesses, since the Life also notes that John Chrysostom 'also ordained as deaconesses of the holy church her three relatives, Elisanthia, Martyria and Palladia' and Palladius notes in connection with her also 'Pentadia and Procle, the deaconesses'; and at Antioch, Palladius had himself met 'the deaconess Sabiniana, aunt of John [Chrysostom] the bishop of Constantinople'. [49]

Increasing numbers of deaconesses appear as combining the office with headship of a community; it seems to be Olympias' most preeminent function, since the enclosed quality of her life is stressed rather than the public service to the church that the Apostolic Canons and Constitutions lead us to expect of the deaconesses. Once deaconess, she built a monastery south of the cathedral and had constructed 'a path from the monastery up to the narthex of the holy church'; but though her communities thus had a lien on the church, 'no one from the outside was permitted to come upon them, the only exception being the most holy patriarch John'. Marthana and Lampadion, further examples, we have already looked at; Palladius has a passing reference also to 'the deaconess in charge of a sisterhood' in a convent into whose charge a cleric unjustly accused of seducing a virgin gives her, to support her until her labour. In this instance the deaconess is combining enclosure with service to the church in the community. Further, when Justa, the

pious virgin in the highly suspect Martyrdom of St. Cyprian, goes to be honoured by the former magician turned bishop for her part in his conversion, 'honouring her with the deaconship and changing her name from Justa to Justina, the blameless, he made her the mother of all the tender girls who were handmaids of the great God.' However doubtful the facts, it is illustrative that this was increasingly what was expected of deaconesses. Nicarete, also from Chrysostom's circle apparently 'would not accept the office of deaconess nor of instructress of the virgins consecrated to the service of the church, because she accounted herself unworthy, although the honour was pressed upon her by John'. Evidently the two go together as with Olympias and her relatives. What is also evident is the honorific quality that is attached to it, the implication is almost that John wishes Nicarete to have the signal honour as a compliment to her life, and her attitude is much like that of all the clerics we read of who were brought, supremely reluctant, to clerical honours, and some of whom once consecrated, like Gregory of Nyssa, felt unable to perform the duties and retreated again to obscurity. There is something of this in the way also Egeria notes Marthana's 'fame' throughout the world; and Palladius asserts Sabiniana to have been 'venerable' - though presumably being the aunt of John Chrysostom would have helped with that.

There seems to be not a little kudos attached to the dignity: although it is difficult to tell exactly how much was due to the office and how much to personal fame when most of our examples were celebrated in their own right - and indeed their personal illustriousness may have swamped that of the office. However, this rare example of an office for women is relatively short-lived, qua office; never really achieving respectability in the West on its own terms, by the 5th century the deaconesses in the East, ordained though they were, were mostly combining the honour with community responsibilities, of necessity

limiting their application of authority within the generality of the church; their ministry and chief privileges were in the Middle Ages inherited by the nuns: those inheriting the mantle of the female Orders which saw women of the 4th and 5th centuries exercise so much power, but which crystallised its limitations. [50]

1. Eva Cantarella, Pandora's Daughters (transl. Maureen B. Fant), Ch. 10 passim.
2. ESAR 5.272; D.3.5.31.; Valerius Maximus, 8.2.2; D. 2.13.12; 34.2.32.4; cf also Jane Gardner, Women in Roman Law and Society, 1986, chapter 11
3. Cicero, pro Caecina, esp. 11-18; for the SC Velleianum, see Jane Gardner, op. cit., p. 234
4. See, for instance, Susan Treggiari, 'Jobs for women', AJAH 1976, pp. 76-104, 'Jobs in the household of Livia', PBSR 43, 1975, 48-77 and 'Lower class women in the Roman economy', Florilegium 1, 65-86; J.V.P. Balsdon, Roman Women: their history and habits
5. Cf. Treggiari, art. cit., pp. 78, 86-7, 90 for sample inscriptions from CIL.
6. Galen, On the Natural Faculties, 3.3; Soranus, Gynecology, 4.7 & 9; 1.3
7. H.W Pleket, Epigraphica, vol. 2: Texts on the Social History of the Greek World; Ausonius, Parentalia, 6; Sozomen, EH 8.23
8. Cf. Treggiari, art. cit. p. 90.; D. 3.1.1.5; C. 2.12.18. Cf also Gardner, op. cit. pp. 262-3 for a discussion of women's disabilities in the law courts.
9. Cantarella, p. 151, drawing upon M. Humbert, Le Remariage a Rome, pp. 42 ff.
10. Ibid., p. 155; Dio Cassius 47.15 and 53.2;
11. Galen, de Theriaca 14; Eusebius EH 6.21; and Diogenes Laertius cited by Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The life of St. Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa', pp. 443-4. in The Craft of the Ancient Historian: Essays in Honour of Chester G. Starr, Eadie & Ober (Eds.)
12. G. 3.148-54; D. 17.2.27; C. 4.37.1; Gardner, op. cit. pp. 239-40
13. Jer. Let. 127.8 to Principia - 'I had the joy of seeing Rome turned into another Jerusalem. Monastic establishments became numerous'.
14. Cf. Jerome Let. 127; Paulinus, life of Ambrose. 4. Marcellina was still living in the family house in Rome some 30 years later when Ambrose received her hospitality while attending the Council of Rome in 382; Life 9. Gregory of Nyssa, Life of St. Macrina col. 962B; Egeria's Pilgrimage 23.3; Acts of Paul and Thecla in Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. Roberts and Donaldson.
15. Rosemary Ruether, 'Mothers of the Church: ascetic women in the late Patristic age' p. 73, in Women of Spirit, ed. Ruether & McLaughlin
16. LH. 41.1
17. Rufinus seems to have developed a school where he taught; Jerome ridicules his poor Latin and his pusillanimous teaching style, Let. 125. Jerome, besides his plentiful writings, worked for the preservation and dissemination of existing texts and tended a scriptorum for copying manuscripts; Rufinus critices his extravagance in this respect and his readiness to pay more for the production of the pagan classical authors, Apology, 2.8
18. Palladius, LH 55; Jer. Let. 108.15 & 27; Origen's Homilies on Luke, prol.; Comm. on Philemon I (PL 26:746)
19. For Jerome's sneers at 'Grunnius'' wealth, luxurious life-style, etc., Apology 3.4; Let. 125.18. Palladius, op. cit. 55; Paulinus of Nola, Ep. 29.8 Let. 108.21; Oribasius, Med. Coll. 6.3 & 4; PJ 4.47 & 10.17; Jer., Let 108.21 again.
20. Jer. Let. 108.15; Gerontius, Life of Mel. secs. 23-7; 37-8; 41-3; 58; 61.
21. Gerontius, secs. 40-48; Jer. Let. 143.2
22. Life of Ant. 3 & 54; Possidius, Life of Aug. 26.1; Aug. Let. 211; LH 1 - but that when he died 'he left no money or goods to his sisters who were virgins, but he commended them to Christ';

Paulinus Let. 5 & 31

23. Paulinus, Natalicia 21.60, specifically with regard to her conversion of Eunomia, a real coup in Paulinus' eyes; LH 54, 55 & 61; Gerontius, op. cit., particularly 22-30; 40-49 & 54-56. LH 56, Life of Ol. 6 & 15.
24. LH 46; 55; 38.
25. Palladius Dialogue 55 & 61; Sozomen, EH 8.24; Aug. Lets. 124, 125 & 126
26. Palladius LH 10; Gerontius, Sec. 38 - though Rosemary Ruether writes that 'faced with his determination to return the gold, Melania finally threw it into the river' ('Mothers of the Church', in Women of Spirit, Ed. Ruether & McLaughlin); but this is not the sense of the text, which says that 'ho hagios' did the throwing, not 'he makaria' - quite apart from accrediting Melania with an altogether uncharacteristic disregard for the power of money. Unlike Thais or Pelagia, she does not hate her wealth so much as wish to disembarass herself of it constructively and laudably. Palladius, LH 61; Gerontius, sec. 20.
27. LH 46; Paulinus Let. 29.11. Life Ol. 5, 7, & 8; Palladius, Dialogue 55 & 60; Sozomen EH 8.9 John Chrys. Lettres a Olympias.
28. Lettres a Olympias passim; Rousselle, op. cit. p. 180-1; Sozomen EH 8.24
29. Palladius, LH 46; her relative, Paulinus of Nola is a further witness to her attitude, with what may well be a more detailed account of the same occasion, and the nature of the case against her, that she not only aided prohibited priests, but hid those fleeing the temporal authorities: 'the leader or companion of all those who stood fast for the faith, she gave refuge to fugitives or accompanied those arrested' and 'she had hidden those who were the objects of greater hatred from the heretics' until 'she was ordered to be haled forth for holding the state law in contempt and to suffer the fate awaiting her hidden proteges unless she agreed to produce them'. She was undismayed by this, says Paulinus: 'Though she had not anticipated arrest, she flew along before her would-be escort to the judge's tribunal. His respect for the woman troubled him and surprise at her bold faith caused him to drop his heretical rage' - upon which she went away and fed 5,000 more monks who were in hiding for three days. Paulinus 29.11
30. Gerontius, secs. 53-7; Peter Brown, 'Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy' in JRS 51 (1961), p.8.
31. Cf. Benedicta Ward's introduction to the Alphabetic Collection, The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, p. xiv; Palladius, LH 41; Alph., Theodora 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10.
32. Ibid. Syncletica, 4, 9, 12, 13, 16, 19,
33. LH 59; Egeria 23.3; cf. also on this Lost Traditions, ed. Wilson-Kastner, p. 76
34. Michael Whitby, 'Maro the Dendrite: an anti-social holy man?' in eds. Whitby, Hardie, Whitby, Homo Viator, pp. 309-317
35. LH 28, 31, 37, 41, 60, 64; Jerome, Let. 24 to Marcellus on Asella
36. LH 67, 31
37. Anon. Apophth., 134, 380
38. Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot, Ch. 15; Alph. Bessarion 4; Anon. Apophth. 63; Palladius, the Syriac LH 2.26 (trans. E. A. Wallis Budge in Stories of the Holy Fathers)
39. HM 14.4, & 10.3; Alph. John the Persian 1; PJ 16.13; Alph, Sarah, 1-5, 9; Benedicta Ward, 'Apophthegmata Matrum' in Studia Patristica vol. 16, pt. 2 (1985), p.65 and Harlots of the Desert p. 62-3.
40. Alph, Serapion 1; Life of St Pelagia the Harlot; Life of St. Thais the Harlot.

41. Alph, John the Dwarf, 40
42. Let. 23.31 ff.
43. Life of Maria the Harlot; LH 5.
44. Alph, Paphnutius 6; PJ 4. 61-2;
45. Anon. Apophth., 49 & 52.
46. Life of Thais, Ch. 1; Life of St. Ephraim, PL 73.2321-22; One old man, when his disciple became fixated with lust even recruited the assistance of a prostitute by giving her the money not to sin with the brother; who was subsequently much surprised to be told that he must wait for her to pray first, and made to contain himself for the duration of fifty prostrations; by the end of which he was filled with remorse for thinking of committing pollution while praying to God, and left 'undefiled'. There are, naturally, fewer of these stories than of the monks rebuking women; but enough to show that women of lesser - or no - status were not behindhand in pointing out error where they perceived it. Anon. Apoph. 44
47. Fr. J. Danielou, The Ministry of Women in the Early Church, p. 20-1; Apostolic Church Order 1.23.17 & 47, 1.41.99; Ap. Cans. Epit. 10; Council of Nicaea, Can. 19; Council of Chalcedon Can. 15; Sozomen EH 8.9.
48. Teaching of the Apostles 16.134-6; 12.134; Apostolic Constitutions 2.26.6; 2.57.10; 2.58.7
49. Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot, Chs. 8, 10-12; Life of St. Macrina col. 990A; Sozomen, EH 9.2; Egeria, cf. n. 33 supra; Life of Ol. 7; Palladius, Dialogue 10; LH 41
50. Life of Olympias, Deaconess 8; Eudokia, Martyrdom of St. Cyprian p. 156 of G. Ronald Kastner's trans. in A Lost Tradition ed. Wilson-Kastner et al.; Sozomen EH 8.23

'This female man of God': the Imago Dei revisited

Perceptions of women's inheritance

In the fourth century, the church, newly legitimised since Constantine, held out new promise: and women were not behindhand in seeking established roles. In this process, women devotees of higher secular status were forging the way, and their importance necessitated a reconsideration of the rhetoric addressed to the female condition. One of the primary disadvantages under which women laboured was that 'because you destroyed God's image, man', women 'deserve to be judged by men'. Man's judgement on their integral nature was indissolubly linked to the body, and this had been advanced as their historical destiny since at the outset they had tempted the fallen angels to lust: 'those angels who rushed from heaven on the daughters of men; so that this shame also attaches to women' (temptation, as we have seen, being the responsibility of the tempting party), and 'were thus enslaved.' But if sufficiently pious, they were exhorted that they had the potentiality to attain 'that self-same angelic nature as a reward, the self-same sex as men'; as written by men, the reward for being a virtuous female was seen as negation of her original abject nature. [1]

To attain this quasi-masculine state, 'Women must seek wisdom like men' said early Church teachers, adopting and adapting neo-Platonist advice such as, 'Do not consider yourself as a woman: I am not attached to you as a woman. Flee all that is effeminate in the soul as if you had taken a man's body'. Such a condition might be imposed externally: Sisinnius was noteworthy for bearing the responsibility for having curbed the masculine lusts and the feminine elements of women in his community 'so in Christ Jesus there is neither man nor woman'. Others used their abilities to de-sex themselves, inducing writers to assess their potential in less theological terms: for such as Augustine, who

knew many, in real terms the Church is 'the strong woman' and 'it would not be decent for us to speak of another woman', for some of the women of his acquaintance obeyed for themselves the command to rid themselves of the 'nature' which equated with their sex. [2]

In fact, we have example after example of women applauded for this capacity; the striking thing about the reports of pious women of the 4th century is how uniformly their virtue is judged in the context of their sex rather than set in a background of Christian achievements in general. When 4th century church writers considered the virtuous woman they would invariably refer to her sex, only to set her apart from it. What is more startling is quite how many writers were eager to report this phenomenon and with what similarity they accord women the compliment of being 'manly'.

Perceptions of struggle: escaping the feminine via the masculine

There were more ways than one to reach this plateau above 'nature'. Some women reached the goal by 'masculine' means: i.e., by direct action, by 'fighting'. Those writers who took a positive line about women's capacities often stressed that the nature became equal because so often the work was: witness the pugnacious words of Palladius who says he intends to record what he knew of many such exempla, 'certain women with manly qualities to whom God apportioned labours equal to those of men, lest any should pretend that women are too feeble to practise virtue perfectly'. The examples are many. Such a one was Melania the Elder: 'What a woman she is, if one can call so manly a Christian a woman!' '...a soldier for Christ...though of the weaker sex' she 'lowered herself to practise humility, so that as a strong member of a weaker sex, she could censure indolent men.' 'Melania, a perfect woman in Christ, yet retaining unaffected the courage of her manly spirit.' Most explicitly, she was 'He anthropos tou deou - the female-man of

God'. Thus also of Macrina: 'It was a woman who provided us with our subject; if indeed she could be styled woman, for I don't know if it is appropriate to call her by her sex who so surpassed her sex.' And Olympias: 'not a woman but an anthropos': 'a manly creature: a man in everything but body'. And Nonna: 'displaying in female form the spirit of a man'; 'a woman in body, yes, but in character she eclipsed any man'. And Melania the Younger, in what was said to have been the report of the Empress Serena, was 'giving evidence to all...that the female sex does not yield in anything to the male sex in matters concerning the virtue given by God'. [3]

Some were accorded this status for specific manly qualities: in the case of Paula, 'her endurance [in ascesis] was scarcely credible in a woman' who was 'forgetful of sex and weakness'. Monica was manly in reaching the mark of philosophy, though she reached it by 'feminine' means - her innate qualities of faith rather than training, while the men around her must struggle for the goal by reason: 'we, forgetful completely of her sex, believed some great man was seated with us.' In this she is like the unlettered old men of the desert whom the learned Arsenius considered had taught him his ABC. These examples were all pronounced on by men: but women also acknowledged this as a goal and might adjudge themselves worthy of it. Sarah is reported as saying it for herself: 'According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts.' [4]

Women's 'manly' actions affected the men around them. This might be by cooperation: the de-sexing effect could be worked out in conjunction with a good enough man, by sharing a vocation, or refusing to share a bed, or both. According to Paulinus of Nola, Bassula and her son-in-law Severus were 'animated by a single vocation and faith which brings you together into a perfect man and empties you of your sex'. Paulinus himself had in Therasia, 'a wife who does not bring her husband

to effeminacy but by union with him is brought herself to share the strength of his nature'. Writing to his friends that Amanda 'does not bring her husband [Aper] to effeminacy' Paulinus echoed the compliment made to his own wife. Jerome considered Theodora, 'once [Lucinius'] wife, now a sister; once a woman, now a man; once an inferior, now an equal' whose husband 'resolved to treat you even on earth as a sister, or, indeed, I may say, as a brother, for difference of sex, while essential to marriage, is not so to a continent tie'. [5]

More contentiously, adopting this ideal might culminate in pious women representing the masculine to their menfolk; the masculine in patristic terminology by inference being the virtuous, if the woman was more virtuous, therefore she was more manly than the men. Artemisia was placed in this position over Rusticus: 'Souls are of no sex; therefore I may fairly call your soul the daughter of hers.' Mary of Egypt, that veteran harlot, for her natural and inherent gifts of faith, taking no account of her sex, or her past, was by the 'perfect monk' Zossimus allotted the masculine role of teaching him: 'It is plain above all that grace is given to you since you called me by name and recognized me as a priest though you have never seen me before. Since grace is recognized not by office but by gifts of the spirit, bless me, for God's sake, and pray for me out of the kindness of your heart.' Gorgonia could reverse the natural order of things so completely that she was held to represent the imago dei, rather than her unpromising husband: 'her nobility consisted in the preservation of the image and the perfect likeness of the Archetype.' [6]

Perceptions of submission: working through the feminine

Some women, however, were not in a position to exercise the option for positive action. For women to embark on the struggle as a 'soldier of Christ' presupposed a fortunate enough background to endow her with

the repute for a 'good life': seen again in sexual terms, to have 'known only one man' and dealt faithfully with him and her children, if any. Many women did not exercise their own options in these matters. Concubines and probrosae would have been in a difficult situation with regard to these sort of requirements; many women came to the ideal late in life with varied histories of which to repent. These women could not escape their tie to the sexual by directly denying it: so they became instead even more 'female', in the abject meekness of their worship. They proved new things about femininity by accepting with complete passivity its innate subjection and being submissive to its burdens; then turning these to advantage. They wept so that the male monks envied them their tears, signifying as they did the capacity for the complete negation of self the males seemed unable to attain; and 'became pregnant with the Holy Spirit', an acceptable reversal of terminology. In so doing they are placed in a position from which the men can learn from them.

The idea is most clearly stated in another tale from Palladius of an anonymous virgin, who sinned and became pregnant. This is a rather dark tale, in which her powers of penitence are manifest in praying for - and obtaining - the death of her baby, 'the fruit of my sin, which I cannot bear': after which she received a vision that 'so-and-so has pleased me more in her penance than in her virginity'. Paesia had but one short hour of repentance permitted her, and yet this was undergone in such a perfect spirit that John the Dwarf heard the judgement of God about her: 'One single hour of repentance has brought her more than the penitence of many who persevere without showing such fervour in repentance.' These 'many', presumably, because of their good life and lack of a chequered career with which these women are endowed would find it hard to be quite so genuinely subsumed with remorse - small wonder the monks so envied the women their tears - their 'legacy of Eve'. The

idea was carried to extremes by Alexandra the maid-servant and Maryana, who displayed complete passivity in accepting sins which they had not committed - not all the desert monks even achieved this; we have stories in about equal numbers of monks justifying themselves or disproving accusations and monks accepting the infamy of a wrongful accusation, the latter being probably more admired. Maryana achieved the ultimate in abjectness in having her infamy disproved only in death (most monks in this kind of tale were proved innocent in time to reap the benefits) while Alexandra devoted her life to the expiation of her potential guilt for a crime that had not even happened. [7]

Perceptions of the fight and its consequences

Those who did fight pursued the struggle in much the same terms as the men: the battle against lust, for instance, was, in the desert mentality, accounted a great privilege and the sign of a stronger nature towards a potentially greater reward, as witness Abba Apollo's judgement on a monk succumbing that 'you are not deemed worthy for the fight'. In this women were not behindhand. Sarah 'for 13 years waged warfare against the demons of fornication' in an immaculately correct manner: 'she never once prayed that the warfare might cease but said "O God, give me strength"'. The same was recorded of an anonymous 'anchorite' who related 'himself' to have been 'inhumanly tempted by fornication' continuing right up until the moment of 'his' death: buried by the seculars who had gone to visit him, they discovered the body was that of a woman. Mary of Egypt, who evidently knew more of what she was missing, prayed to her mentor, the Virgin Mary, for release from 'thoughts that would push me into harlotry again'; and more wistfully confessed that throughout her forty-seven years in the desert, one of her greatest temptations had been a longing for wine and 'lewd songs'. [8]

They also fought their fight against men, equally positively. Sarah talked of the sheer futility of struggling constantly for male approval, which we have seen her notably short of: 'if I prayed that all men should approve my conduct, I should find myself a penitent at the door of each' - like the suppliants noted above. This may be symptomatic that many of the monks thought all women should strive only in this abasing way; but Sarah knew of two ways to fight this battle, and regarded suppliance towards her mere male colleagues as a waste of time - 'I shall rather pray that my heart may be pure towards all' as the real crux of the Christian life. And without tremor she confronted Paphnutius with not having done the will of God in 'letting your brother be reviled'. Pelagia reached out and seized Nonnus by the conscience in directly confrontational terms, not at all in the abject manner proper in a woman of her station approaching a bishop for salvation: 'unless you give me rebirth as a bride of Christ, and present me to God, you are no better than an apostate and an idolator' - at which 'all the bishops were amazed, never having seen such desire for salvation'. [9]

But some women fought male clerics not by fighting but by applying the males' own logic to turn the tables, sometimes to teach them, sometimes simply to wrongfoot them. Not all submitted to the male conclusions of the link between femaleness and physicality. The school of thought that told women to avoid being seen in order not to provide temptation could be countered by the observation of an amma secure in her own self-knowledge to a monk sedulously avoiding seeing her nuns: 'if you were a proper monk you would not have even noticed we were women.' Ephraim similarly learned at the instance of a woman, and she not even a nun, when a harlot reinforces the concept of imago dei so as to give him the lesson from Holy Scripture for which he had prayed: 'It is natural that I should look at you since I was formed out of you; but as for you, you have no reason to look at me, for it was the earth from

which you were formed and it is on that that your eyes should be fixed.' Nor was it only women who took the attitude that the anti-women stance could be overdone. John Cassian told of Paul, a monk who made a virtue of exaggeratedly avoiding women, to the extent of running away from them, till eventually he had a stroke and had to end his days in a nunnery being cared for by them; the illuminating thing being that this was evidently seen by his colleagues in the light of a lesson to his over-scrupulosity. [10]

Ultimately: how could one be feminine and sanctified?

Women in the 4th century were astonishingly forceful and influential, so much so as to obtain from critical male sources all the accolades noted above: well has it been said 'the enthusiasm with which they took to the ascetic life, their repugnance for sexual relations within a marriage which had been forced on them and the chance to be recognized in a way of life in which they could be men's equals made the women of the Empire one of the principal forces in the transformation of the ancient world' [Aline Rousselle]. And yet it has also been said of the late period, 'there was no concept of feminine spirituality as such'. [Benedicta Ward]. Which contains more truth? [11]

Unquestionably, what women did altered society: they were powerful movers and shakers. And yet, despite all the examples of these powerful women above, and in previous chapters; despite accolades such as 'man-woman of God'; despite women who were reckoned <u>exempla</u> to all, not just to their sex; despite a capacity for teaching even holy men and the men frankly admitting that this was so, not least by their tears and capacity for penitence; despite the male monks' conclusion that they could and should learn from the feminine example, because ultimately all souls were feminine (i.e. supplicatory) before God: despite all these considerations, feminine spirituality was not admitted as a realistic

concept in the eyes of the patristic authors - the guardians of the perceptions of the Church. To the fathers, women remained 'hearth-keepers or harlots': the constant re-iteration of the idea that 'so holy was she that she was more man than woman' in fact only serves to reinforce this. The prevalent tenet of patristic thought with regard to women said that anyone that holy could not be a woman: every one of the many who achieved fame through piety was held to 'surpass her sex' - never, it should be noted, to elevate the expectations held of her sex. The extension of this thinking was that however many of this kind of woman there were, they would never be taken as representative, always as superior. There is a Desert tale that gives this sub-text more clearly than most: Macarius was presented with a young girl to heal whose flesh was all eaten away with disease and worms. He healed her without difficulty: 'but in such a way that no femininity showed in her form, no feminine parts were apparent so that in all her contact with men she never beguiled them with womanly deceits' [12] - the perfect woman from the clerical viewpoint. The clear inference is that 'womanly parts' are inseparable from 'womanly deceits': the mere possession of them disqualifies from the ultimate in piety. Whatever was said of women, they could not truly 'transcend gender differences' [Ward] or 'constitute a "third sex"' [Clark]; they could only disguise the sex they had, either actively, in assuming the outward habit and disguise of a man, or by assuming inward 'male' habits of determination in piety to be written up as having thus disguised the masculinity of their souls - being, therefore, 'a man' despite all appearances. Saintly women of the fourth century might be able to change the disposition of the empire, but they could not alter the dispositions of the Church Fathers. [13]

1. Tert. On Female Dress 1.2
2. Clem. of Alex. Strom. 8.1275; Porphyry, Let. to Marcella cited in Rousselle, op. cit. p. 187; Aug. Serm. 37.1-2
3. LH 41; Paulinus, Lets. 29.6-7, 45.2; LH 9; Greg. Nyssa, Life of Mac. col. 962A; Pall. Dial. 55; Greg. Naz., De Rebus Suis 116; De Vita Sua 51; Ger. Life of Mel. sec. 12
4. Jer. Let. 108.14; PJ 15.7; Aug. on the Blessed Life 2.10; Alph. Sarah 4
5. Paulinus of Nola, Let. 31; Aug. Let. 27; Let. 44.3; Jer. Lets. 71.3 & 75.2
6. Jer. Let. 122.4; Life 10; Greg. Naz. Or. 8.6
7. Life of Pel., 9, 15; Life of Maria. 10; LH 5. 69; Alph, John the Dwarf 40; Syriac LH 2.26
8. PJ 5.4; World 6.63; Life of Mary of Eg. 19
9. Alph. Sarah 5; Paph. 6; Life of Pel. 8
10. PJ 4.62; Life of Eph. cols. 2321-22; J. Cass., Coll. 3.26
11. Rousselle, Porneia p. 193; Ward, 'Apophthegmata Matrum' in Pat. Studs. 65
12. HM Mac. 21 (Rufinus' additions)
13. Ward, Harlots of the Desert p. 62; Elizabeth Clark, Women in the Early Church p. 17.

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